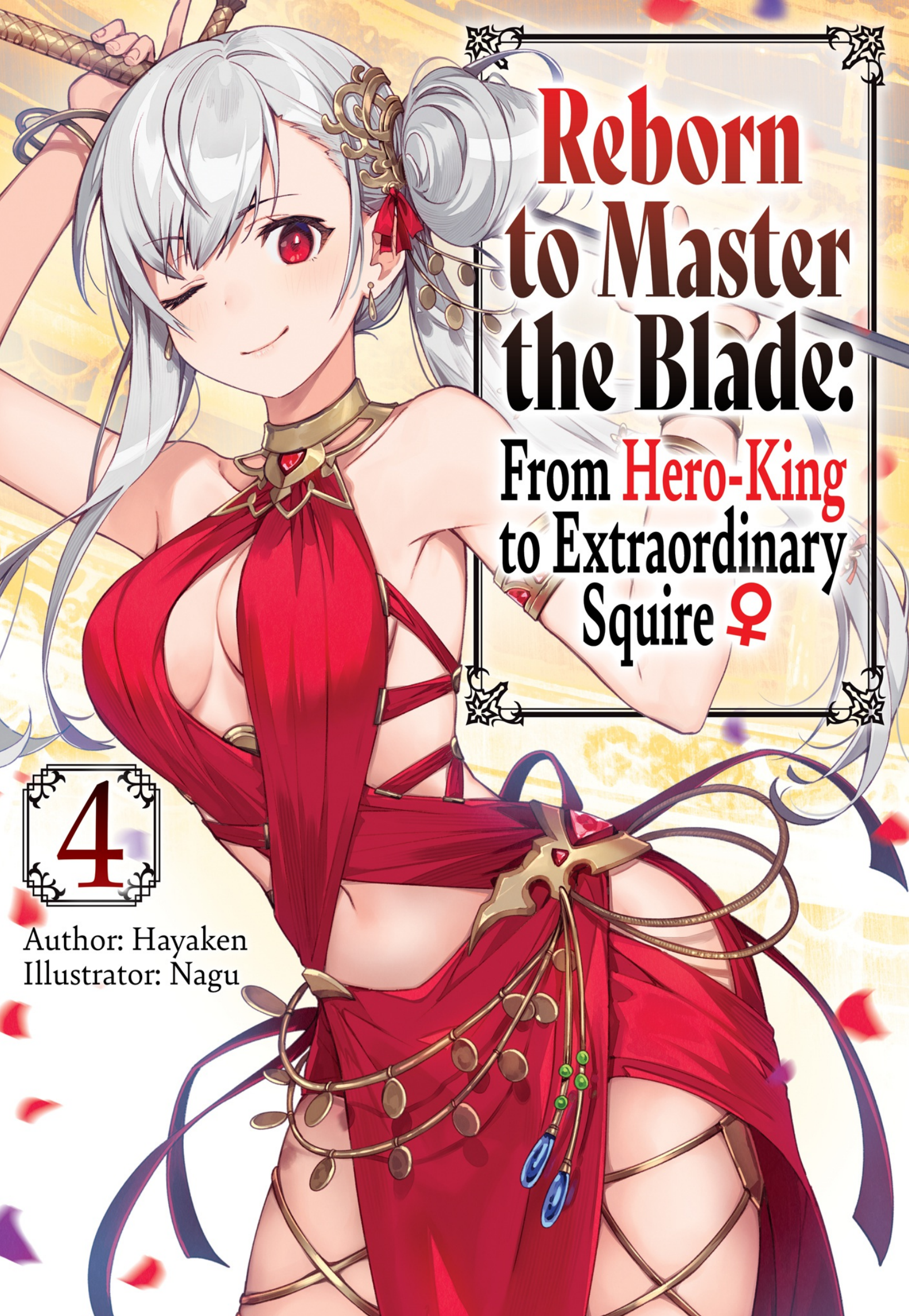




Reborn to Master the Blade:

From **Hero-King**
to Extraordinary
Squire ♀

4

Author: Hayaken
Illustrator: Nagu





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Chapter I: Inglis, Age 15—Dual Starlets (1)

The circumstances surrounding the hial menace Ripple had complicated matters around the knights' academy, but Inglis and the others had successfully resolved the problem. Ripple had thanked them profusely before heading to the border with Venefic, where she was supposed to be helping in the war effort.

On the other hand, the school building was a wreck. The cafeteria inside had suffered the same fate, and with their unlimited meal plan sealed away, Inglis and Rafinha were now in a crisis. Every day, they aided in the reconstruction effort with hungry stomachs, hoping for the cafeteria to reopen as soon as possible. In the end, their hasty work output only left their stomachs emptier.

Grrrrgl!

Liselotte, walking in front of Inglis and Rafinha carrying tools, spun around in shock. "Wh—?! Whose stomach might that have been? It was very unladylike."

Inglis silently pointed at Rafinha, who did the same to Inglis.

"Liar! It was you, Chris!"

"No! It was you, Rani!"

"Don't blame other people! I heard it from both sides of me!" Leone yelled as she walked between them.

"Tch..." came the dismissive reply from both Inglis and Rafinha.

"The hunger has you two out of control..." Leone laughed wryly.

"Are you truly that hungry?" Liselotte asked. "The rest of us are eating as much as you are..."

For the time being, all students who helped in the reconstruction received the same rations for their work.

"It's not enough at all!" the pair responded.

“Well, why not think of it as a diet? See, if I lose a little here, my back might feel better...” Leone gestured toward her own chest, where Rin had burrowed and was relaxing. It seemed Rin preferred her today.

“Well... I guess you could say that...” Inglis nodded, understanding her point.

But Rafinha was an outlier in that regard. “No you can’t! I don’t have anything there *to* lose!”

“Now, now, Rafinha. You’re slender. That’s something to be envied,” Liselotte remarked.

“Well then, I’d like to trade. I absolutely want big ones like Chris and Leone! If I don’t have anything to lose at times like this, I’ll just shrivel up and die instead!”

“Aha ha... I am honestly amazed by how you never seem to put on weight regardless of how much you eat, Rafinha.”

Rafinha paused before making a grand declaration. “And thus, since my life is in peril, I’ll be taking some of Chris’s food!”

“Whaaat?! Even if you keep asking me, Rani—”

“It’s fine! You’ve got plenty of calories stored away right here!”

“Eeek! S-Stop it, Rani! I’m carrying a big log right now!”

“Oh? I feel like they’ve gotten a little bit bigger again. It’s not like you have much to eat. How are they growing?! There, there, there!” Rafinha said, poking at Inglis.

“S-Stop! Knock it off! I get your point. Why don’t we go fishing in Lake Bolt later? I’ll give you a little bit extra of what we catch.”

“Huh? But the fishers there complained. They said we were threatening their livelihood.”

“If we do it quietly at night, they’ll never notice. Probably...”

“Isn’t that poaching?” Leone interjected, chuckling.

“Does this really constitute ‘survival’?” Liselotte asked wryly.

Interrupting their conversation, Principal Miriela called out their names as she

came rushing over. “Inglis! Rafinha!”

“Principal Miriela?” Inglis asked.

“Did something happen?” Rafinha followed.

“A messenger from the palace just arrived! King Carlias requests your presence!” Miriela answered.

“A summons from His Majesty?”

“At the palace?!”

“Yes. Sorry, but you’re to head to the palace as soon as possible,” Miriela explained.

“Oooh! All right, Chris!”

“Heaven’s smiled upon us, Rani!”

Inglis’s and Rafinha’s eyes lit up. Their thought process was simple: The palace. Summoned there. *Thanks for the help!* A feast! Yes, a feast!

Their hope propelled them into action.

“Yay! I can’t wait! ♪ The food at the palace was delicious the other day!”

“Yeah, you’re right! Let’s make haste.”

“I’ll call a carriage, then. You two go get ready,” Principal Miriela said.

“Of course, ma’am.” Inglis nodded.

“No, that would take too long! Our food will get cold!” Rafinha cried. “You know how we should go, Chris?”

“Possibly?”

“Yeah, you know! Let’s just whoosh over! It’ll be faster than a carriage!”

“Oh, right. Err... Well...” Miriela stammered.

“It’ll be fine, Principal Miriela! We’ll take the *Star Princess!*”

The *Star Princess* was Inglis and friends’ private Flygear. They had captured it from Highland so they could rush from the battle above the palace to the knights’ academy. It was still intact when everything was over, and they’d been

permitted to keep it for their own use. Flygears for Highlanders were better made than the ones for the surface. Something was different about it now, though...

“Yes, you can take it, I suppose. It’s cute. Very girly.”

“Thanks, I’ll go get it!” Rafinha replied. “Hold on, Chris!”

“Okay...”

In no time at all, a Flygear piloted by Rafinha appeared over their heads. It had been repainted entirely in hot pink. Apart from the coloring, the front of the hull had also been painted with extremely prominent sparkling, starry, girly eyes. The whole thing was covered with glittering details. Rafinha had decided that since it was theirs now, it had to be cute; it should be made *theirs*. Her classmate in the knight program, Pullum, had helped out.

“All right, let’s go, Chris! Get in!”

“Okay...”

It was a high-performance Flygear, and Inglis had made her own tweaks...but she was still a bit reluctant to ride it. It was a bit *too* girly for her. Her own self-conception still preferred something cool-looking with subdued colors—a bit more masculine than Rafinha’s tastes. Maybe in black all over. But whenever Rafinha insisted on something, Inglis was powerless to resist. Rafinha, who was like a granddaughter to her, wanted her toys in pink. Grandfathers never could argue with such cute granddaughters.

“All right, let’s go! Set a course for deliciousness!”

“Indeed. Let’s go.”

With Rafinha at the helm, the *Star Princess* soared away into the sunset.



The direct flight path from the knights’ academy to the palace traveled over a crowded boulevard. Of course, the design of the *Star Princess* caught the attention of the people below.

“Ah! It’s the knights! Heeey!”

“Yay!”

The adults didn’t pay much attention, but the children waved happily.

To be precise, Inglis and the others weren’t knights yet; they were students training to be knights, but the children couldn’t tell the difference. If someone was in a Flygear, then they had to be a knight.

“Hi there!” Rafinha, always friendly, slowed the Flygear to a hover and waved to the kids. With dinner on the table, so to speak, she was in a good mood. And because the children saw her as a real knight who was even stopping to wave, they waved back in delight.

“Aha ha ha. Kids are so cute. Don’t you think so, Chris?”

“They’re adorable. This reminds me of you when you were little. You were that cute too.”

“You were a kid then too, you know. Ah, well. I want to have kids soon.”

“Overruled. You’re still too young for that.”

“But wouldn’t you like to have kids soon? Kids are happier with a younger mom.”

“N-No way! I don’t need kids of my own!” Just the thought of having her own kids terrified her. She didn’t even want to imagine it. It sent a chill down her spine.

“Because you wouldn’t be able to fight anymore?”

“Y-Yeah. That’s it.”

The truth was that she had a much more fundamental, physical problem with it. But she could leave it at that.

“Wait, isn’t that thing the knights are riding really lame?” a boy asked.

“Wow... You’re right, why’s it so pink and glittery?”

The children who had been so excited to see them now only had critiques for the *Star Princess*. It came as quite a shock to Rafinha.

“Huuuh?!”

Inglis, meanwhile, wanted to applaud the boy who had not only distracted Rafinha but pointed out the plain facts. *Thank you, young one.*

“Th-That’s mean! Pullum and I were proud of this!” Rafinha pouted.

“It is a bit too flashy. Perhaps we can change the color back...” Inglis suggested.

“No way! I think it’s really cute!” A girl in the crowd of children fervently defended the *Star Princess*.

“That’s right! Listen up, boys! This one’s for girls! It’s a girl thing! Boys wouldn’t get it!” Rafinha’s cheer had returned. “Right, Chris? Right?”

“Well... The boys may have a point... Maybe in a situation like this, it’s best to adopt a compromise that everyone can live with?”

“Denied! You there. What’s your name?” Rafinha asked the girl who had spoken up.

“Alina...”

“Well, then, Alina. Thanks for being so nice! Later, do you want to ride the cute Flygear?”

“R-Really?!”

“Yeah! We have things to do today, but if you see us again, just say hi!”

“Okay! Promise?”

“Yep, I promise! See you then!” Smiling and waving, Rafinha set the *Star Princess* in motion again. “What a nice girl.”

Rafinha probably won’t even consider repainting the Star Princess until she gives that girl her ride, Inglis realized. I need to remember her face so that can happen as soon as possible.

“What’s wrong, Chris? Are you going to complain that I make promises too easily?”

“No, that’s not true. I just want to remember her face so that we can find her again.” If anything, Inglis was pleased with how friendly Rafinha was with the citizens. As both a knight and the daughter of a duke, she needed to be

approachable; it was a good trait. The trust it birthed might serve her well someday. It was one of Rafinha's many talents—though perhaps putting it that way betrayed Inglis's bias toward the girl.

"Oh, that would be really helpful actually. Chris, you're good at remembering people's faces."

"Yep. Life experience." In her previous life as a king, remembering faces had been a vital skill, and she'd given it a lot of practice. Even for trivial exchanges, if the king, foremost in the realm, remembered it and touched on it later, his people would be happy. Such small pleasures accumulated and became loyalty. A king should remember the faces of everyone he meets, even just once. At least, that was what King Inglis had done whenever possible.

"So is that why you remember the faces of strong people? To pick a fight with them later?"

"No, I request a sparring bout with them." *I can let her think that at least.*

"Those are the same thing!"

"No, they aren't. It's not a demand, just a polite request."

As they spoke, the *Star Princess* reached the vicinity of the palace, where they were stopped by a knight on guard duty riding a Flygear.

"Halt! You're entering the palace's air defense zone and must identify yourselves. Students from the academy, I see. What brings you to the palace?"

"Rafinha Bilford and Inglis Eucus of the knights' academy! We've arrived after hearing that King Carlias has requested our presence!" Rafinha answered.

"Oh, it's you! I've already been informed to expect you. You can land your Flygear in the courtyard. I'll lead you in."

"Yes, understood."

They followed the knight and landed the *Star Princess* in the courtyard. It wasn't long before they heard another person's voice.

"Ah, you two! I'm glad you came!" Reddas, captain of the Royal Guard, ran over at a brisk pace and bowed deeply. Something was different about him. It's not that he was a particularly haughty person, but he was a high-ranking knight.

Even though his shameless overprotectiveness of his younger brother, Silva, gave him an odd air, he normally had a certain gravitas when speaking with Inglis and Rafinha. Today, he was unusually humble for some reason.

“Reddas...?”

“Er, sure...”

Inglis and Rafinha looked at each other, a bit confused. And it wasn't just Reddas who had come to greet them, but also the Royal Guard under his command, who streamed in en masse.

“Welcome! We've awaited your presence!” The crowd bowed deeply to Inglis and Rafinha.

“Wh-What? Something's strange here...” Rafinha said.

“I agree...” Inglis muttered. There were too many of them for it to be a mere welcome. There were enough knights there to overwhelm them.



“Right this way! His Majesty is waiting!” Reddas led the way. It was true that Inglis and Rafinha had saved the king recently, but they still thought this level of attention was unnecessary.

What in the world...? Inglis wondered as she followed Reddas. She then noticed three knights had surrounded them in particular. *Guards, maybe?*

“This is pretty showy, Chris...”

“Yeah, Rani. Maybe we should be careful for now...”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Maybe they’re leading us into a trap and they’re going to attack all at once?” Inglis whispered quietly. It was strange for mere students from the knights’ academy to be given such close protection. This was the kind of guard expected for a princess or a high official.

“Huh?! We didn’t do anything wrong... Well, maybe we did? You were pretty violent then, Chris...”

“So what, you’re saying it’s my fault?”

“I mean, you did pick a fight with a Highland ambassador and send him flying with a kick... You jammed the king’s severed arm into his wound too. Stuff like that.”

“Ah...”

“And that Evel kid did end up dying in combat, right? Even though it wasn’t you who did it...”

“I still share responsibility...I guess.”

“Maybe they’re upset with you because of how much damage you dealt to him?”

In the end, it was not Inglis who had killed Highland’s ambassador, Archlord Evel, but the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front. Nonetheless, she had definitely struck him a heavy blow. She might well have been an accomplice in his slaying.

“W-Well... If someone wanted to put it that way, maybe...”

Evel had been from the Papal League, one of Highland's two primary factions. The Papal League had not intended on any show of rapprochement to begin with, but even so—if Evel's death had changed their position from simple hostility to a demand that the person responsible be surrendered to them, Inglis was a much easier scapegoat than the black-masked man, whose whereabouts were unknown. King Carlias seemed subservient to the Highlanders, willing to accept any high-handedness, so that was a possibility.

Inglis chuckled at the thought. "That might be fun to deal with."

As far as Inglis could tell, King Carlias wasn't incompetent. So, no matter how elite the Royal Guard might be, he couldn't expect so few of them to be able to capture her. Meaning, he had to have something up his sleeve. Inglis wanted to see it. However, if that was true, no feast would be awaiting them...

"W-Wait! You can't fight them! That would make us traitors!"

"Maybe. But it's okay, Rani. I'll be sure to tell them you weren't involved."

"You can't! We're family! We're practically sisters—or at least someday we'll actually be sisters..." Rafinha trailed off.

"No, I don't plan on that." For Inglis and Rafinha to really be sisters, Inglis and Rafael would have to...

Anything but that.

"Anyway, it's only natural for us to be together, right? You can't shoulder all of the blame..." Rafinha nervously tugged at Inglis's sleeve. It was so adorable that Inglis had to smile.

"Mm. I know. It'll be fine."

As their whispered conversation concluded, an incredibly pleasing scent wafted to their noses. Having infiltrated the palace as maids recently, they had some idea of its internal layout. The kitchen was nearby.

So there really is a feast?!

"Ahh! Wow, that smells scrumptious!" Rafinha couldn't help but remark loudly.

"Yes! The feast is ready! But first, you must speak with His Majesty. Then, we

celebrate!” Reddas said.

“But what are we celebrating?” Inglis asked.

The recent incident had not led to a more cordial relationship with the Papal League as King Carlias had hoped. Instead, it had resulted in a detrimental battle with the Steelblood Front. It had been a good fight for Inglis. Good training, even. It had left her satisfied. For the country, though, there was nothing to celebrate. A banquet and praise for her efforts, perhaps—but a full-on celebration would be strange. Just what was going on?

“I can’t tell you yet, but you’ll know soon. I hope you enjoy it.”

“Hey, Chris, I guess this means there was nothing to worry about after all?”

“Maybe?”

Reddas’s expression was quite cheerful, and he didn’t seem to be lying. If it was a trap, there’d have been no reason to prepare a feast, but Inglis still couldn’t discern what reason there was for celebration. That wasn’t the point, though—the feast had become a reality. Honestly, she couldn’t help but rejoice.

“All right! I’m so happy!”

“Me too, Rani.”

“And here’s the audience chamber,” Reddas announced. “Shall we enter?”

“Yes!” Inglis and Rafinha, their hearts dancing with anticipation, stepped into the audience chamber where King Carlias awaited. The chamber was already crowded, and as they entered, they drew attention at once. Inglis and Rafinha heard whispers as they walked past.

“Oh, they’re here!”

“As beautiful as ever!”

“Ah, so that’s the girl they’ve been talking about... She certainly—ah, but...”

Judging by their clothing, Reddas’s Royal Guard are the most prevalent, but there’s others as well, Inglis thought. By their own fine attire, maybe they’re aristocrats close to King Carlias?

“Congratulations!” someone called out, and then other exclamations rang

out.

“Congratulations!”

“I’ll follow you to my dying breath!”

Cheers and clapping erupted.

“Huh?” Inglis and Rafinha tilted their heads in confusion. Just what was there to be so overjoyed about?

“Wait, wait, everyone. It’s too soon, they haven’t been told anything yet,” Reddas chuckled and called out. “Now, please, step before His Majesty.” He cleared a path for Inglis and Rafinha before stepping back himself. It was as if he were a subordinate or a retainer to them, paying respect to his superiors. At any rate, it was an unnatural level of humility.

“Y-Yes...” A bit bewildered, Inglis and Rafinha made their way to King Carlias’s throne.

Inglis set one knee on the ground and bowed deeply. “Inglis Eucus and Rafinha Bilford respond to your summons.”

“Mm. I welcome you... Ah, I see. Before you were palace maids, today students at the knights’ academy—but beautiful flowers either way.”

“Thank you,” Inglis said after a pause. She was more the practical type—she’d take the feast over the praise. There was only so long she could keep her stomach from rumbling, and this would be a very awkward situation for it to do so. So—feast first!

“I’m sure many of you have already met this pair, but not everyone has. These two young ladies are the ones who saved my life during the recent battle! I’d like to thank them for their help on that occasion.” King Carlias bowed his head.

Inglis had already thought that King Carlias didn’t care at all about vanity or appearances. His bow further reinforced that impression.

That’s why he can so easily bow to a mere student of his own knights’ academy like me. I believe Prince Wayne shares the same tendency. Their politics may be in opposition, but their personalities are similar.

Clap, clap, clap!

The cheers arose again.

“You did a wonderful job!”

“Thank you for saving His Majesty in our stead!”

“I’ll never forget the sight!”

Praise, followed by more praise.

“Ha ha ha, it feels good being honored like this,” Rafinha whispered to Inglis.

It’s good that Rafinha’s happy, but... “I’d really rather get to the feast myself... If I don’t soon, my stomach is going to get loud!”

“Ugh, me too... But that would be very rude in front of the king, so we have to endure!”

A hundred words of praise aren’t worth a single bite of meat. C’mon, c’mon...

“Especially you, Inglis...” King Carlias said.

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“You single-handedly took on a Highlander archlord and repelled the Steelblood Front assault. I must say, the way you fight is less like a beautiful girl and more like a fierce god!”

“It’s an honor.” Inglis bowed slightly. Honestly, she was barely listening to what King Carlias had to say. She was focusing on keeping her stomach quiet. Plus, she was preoccupied with an anticipation of the upcoming words: *And thus, let us celebrate with a feast! Bring the food!*

“Mm. Whether standing in my presence now or Evel’s before, you remain calm and collected, not showing even the slightest hesitance.”

That wasn’t true. For one, she was nervous, because it would be embarrassing if her stomach rumbled, and she was excited. She couldn’t stop imagining the palace’s extravagant feast, of course. All told, she was anything but calm and collected right now.

“Reddas tells me that, though still a young girl, you have not just a keen

strategic eye and an eloquent tongue, but an extraordinarily sharp mind as well.”

“Yes,” she said after another pause.

“And thus I have decided to reward your achievements with the utmost sincerity.”

Here it is! The banquet begins! A feast. I’m so happy. I can feel myself start to smile.

“Inglis Eucus, I proclaim you the new captain of the Royal Guard!”

Inglis’s eyes snapped wide open. She was paying attention now.

“Whaaat?!” Rafinha screamed in her place.

“Congratulations!” Those in attendance must have known that King Carlias would announce this. That was why a few had cheered too early.

Clap, clap, clap, clap!

The sound of the clapping and cheers echoed through the audience chamber.

“But what about my feast?”

Grrrgl!

Unable to hold back any longer, her stomach made a fierce rumble at the end of her question. Fortunately, the applause drowned it out.

“Y-You? Captain of the Royal Guard, Chris? It doesn’t seem possible...”
Rafinha’s eyes seemed likely to roll to the back of her head from shock.

Having overheard Rafinha, King Carlias smiled. “You may be forgiven for thinking so. It’s certainly an unusual choice. But I believe my own eyes. Inglis is of a caliber to rival even a holy knight or a hial menace. Why not bring out the best in her? As a king, one must evaluate people properly and treat them in accordance with that.”

To be honest, if I wanted to be a captain to the knights, that's well within my capabilities, Inglis thought. In my past life, I led a large country, one much larger than this. Compared to that, leading an order of knights would be easy. In that sense, King Carlias is correct in his perception. He accurately assessed my abilities. But at the same time, he's wrong. Correct in regard to my abilities, but incorrect in regard to my nature. Rafinha knows me better. This is impossible.

“But the main problem is that Chris’s personality isn’t really suited for that—no, even before that, Reddas, are you fine with no longer being the captain?” Rafinha turned to Reddas, as if looking for his help. If Inglis were to become the captain of the Royal Guard, Reddas would go down in rank. Surely he had to have objections to this.

However, Reddas shook his head without the slightest hesitation. “I don’t mind at all! In fact, I beg it of Inglis! I accept the demotion to lieutenant-captain and will serve the new captain with wholehearted devotion!”

“Huuuh?! Wh-Why go so far?!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“In the moment when Inglis... No, when Captain Inglis confronted Evel from Highland and kicked him far beyond the castle...I felt a frightening sense of pleasure. Didn’t you all?” he called out to his knights.

“Yes! We did!”

“It was unbelievably refreshing!”

Evel’s behavior, even toward King Carlias, had been utterly lacking in respect, simply trampling his dignity. Inglis’s blow seemed to have literally kicked away the depression of Reddas and the knights, who had been forced to watch it up close.

“Until now, we have only been able to bow down to the Highlanders. No matter how outrageous their treatment of us, we have had no choice but to endure. Without the Artifacts granted to us by Highland, we would have no way to defend ourselves from the magicite beasts... Even the power of holy knights and the hial menaces derive from Highland. There was no way to change our subordinateness to Highland... Nonetheless, Captain Inglis, with neither Rune nor Artifact, was able to defeat a Highlander of the grandest rank. She broke through our way of thinking, our sense of stagnation! Her beauty, her power in

that moment is etched into our minds! We can't get it out of our heads! Captain Inglis, please lead us!" Reddas insisted.

"We beg of you!"

"Captain Inglis!"

The Royal Guard, including Reddas, were in a fervor. They all gazed at Inglis, eyes gleaming with hope.

"And that is why there's no need to worry, Inglis," King Carlias said. "You've completely charmed the Royal Guard. You are a true goddess defending this country, more than even a hial menace... I entrust these men to you." He clapped a hand on Inglis's shoulder.

A short, portly man wearing not a knight's armor but the clothing of a civilian official cut through the swelling enthusiasm before Inglis could even respond. "B-but, Your Highness! I cannot approve! I-Is she not Runeless?! Granting her a high rank such as captain of the Royal Guard would set a poor example! There is simply no precedent! It violates our country's knightly traditions!"

"Fool! There is no need to worry about such trifling matters in light of Inglis! Her talents are so outstanding that she needs no Rune! Hers is a new existence, unbound by the old ways... To reject the unknown, to continue to fear change, will leave us unable to survive on the surface!" King Carlias announced.

"His Majesty is correct! We of the Royal Guard approve. Who can overrule us?" Reddas agreed.

"Indeed!" Inglis finally said, having watched quietly all this time. "I agree with this man!" She turned to face the administrator.

"What?!" Everyone but Rafinha let out a stunned gasp.

Inglis brandished her right hand, bare of any Rune. "As you see, I have no Rune—and this country's rule is that the Runeless rise no higher than trainee squire! The king, meant to set the standard for all, and Reddas, the captain of the Royal Guard, would break that rule themselves?"

"Ngh?!" Reddas grunted.

"B-But, Inglis!" King Carlias began.

Inglis knew they would keep insisting she take the position, but she wouldn't back down. *The time has come to fight. I, for one, am absolutely against this personnel decision. It's too bothersome. As a knight captain, I would be walking the same path as in my previous life: offering my life up to the country and its people.*

Inglis was done with that. She'd already exhausted the possibilities of that way of living in her previous life. It should be left to someone else, someone more motivated. She wanted to stand on the front lines, sharpening her skills in battle.

So I absolutely refuse...but it wouldn't be good to offend King Carlias with my refusal. I've come to like my position and my life as a student at the knights' academy, and if I were to end up in a situation where I couldn't stay in the country, I'd be separated from Rafinha. So I need to refuse, calmly but firmly!

Inglis spoke clearly to those around her. "Rules are made to be followed. Thus, I cannot accept a position as a knight captain. I do not want our knightly traditions, handed down unbroken from generation to generation, to be bent for me alone!"

"B-But, Inglis—do we not weave our future by reviewing our old customs, and finding better ones?!" King Carlias argued.

"His Majesty is correct! We must make the decisions that are truly for the best of our country and its people rather than clinging to rigid tradition! You have inspired that in us!" Reddas insisted.

As Inglis had expected, both were firmly set on her appointment. They seemed to truly believe that installing Inglis as a knight captain was for the sake of the country. It was a good attitude to have, willing to see the good in things without being bound by wisdom passed down from elders.

It was wonderful—but that was precisely why it was bothersome. Inglis didn't want to get herself involved in things for the sake of society or the sake of others. "But is it sure to be a better way? Is it truly for the sake of the country and its people? Isn't one of those people here now, objecting?"

"A trifling matter, Inglis. A trifling matter set against much greater ones," King Carlias said.

“Indeed. He merely seeks to safeguard his own position!” Reddas agreed.

“It’s only natural for a person to safeguard their position. I see nothing wrong with it—were I a knight captain, others would surely voice their discontent.”

“Yet still...!”

“But...!”

“And at the same time, seeing my Runeless self become a knight captain, other squires would seize the hope of one day becoming knights. Yet would that hope not be forlorn?”

“Of course, if they did not share your power.”

“It’s because they lack the strength to wield Artifacts.”

“Yes, but if I, Runeless, rise so far as captain of the Royal Guard, yet nothing changes for them, would they not be dissatisfied? Those now of status would jump at shadows, those now squires would feel only a moment of elation. It would lead to division between those with Runes and those without. I fear that my single exception would lead to unnecessary conflict. Please consider this. I cannot defend the country alone. It can only be done if we are united, standing hand in hand. Our country has a tradition and a record of accomplishing this, even if it’s meant relying on the Highlanders. Is it worth driving a wedge between us to make me a knight captain? There may be something to gain, but I believe there’s much to lose. I don’t want to see the country driven into chaos for my sake!”

“Hmm... Even a small movement of the heart cannot avoid creating division, you say...” the king said.

“So you mean that in the overall view, it would be a poor choice for the country?” Reddas asked, seeing her point now.

“Yes. So...unfortunately, I cannot accept the position. It’s truly a shame, but...” As Inglis spoke, a single tear ran down her cheek. It was half an act, but half-serious.

It’s no lie that I have regrets. Not, of course, about the position as a knight captain, nor about staying in my lower status. I regret the feast that could have

awaited.

After she'd declined the appointment, there was no way King Carlias would see a cause for celebration and a banquet. She was truly sad in light of the feast that might have awaited, and she couldn't help but cry, but she probably had no choice but to depart.

"Chris..." Nearby, Rafinha also cried. She understood from the circumstances that she'd have to give up on the feast.

"Inglis..." the king said.

"I'm sorry to have put you through this," Reddas apologized.

Her emotion seemed to have a different meaning to King Carlias and Reddas. The tears of Inglis, already a stunning beauty at fifteen, seemed to resonate in their hearts. It seemed they were likely to give in. But what would it mean? There would be no feast, only the work of politely rejecting a post she had no interest in.

At this rate, I should have kept helping with the rebuilding of the knights' academy and gotten rations. Those're probably gone by now too. No, this is just the beginning—no matter what, I need to make the most of it. At least let me have this! With that resolve kept firm, Inglis again kneeled before King Carlias. "Your Majesty, while I cannot accept a position as captain of the knights, I offer my strength to you."

"Hm... Meaning?"

"In the event of a crisis such as the one recently, I will rush to your aid, so call on me. Use my strength as you will. In this way, the unneeded conflict of raising me to knight captain will be avoided. I believe that, in a way, this is how I can be used most effectively."

"But you would be—"

"I don't mind. I have no need for status or honors. As long as my heart is satisfied, I want for nothing." And, of course, what would satisfy her heart was fighting strong enemies, gaining battle experience, and witnessing her growth. But how her words would be taken depended on the listener.

“What an admirable young lady! I’m impressed by your spirit.” King Carlias seemed to have come away with the understanding that it was for the good of the country and its people. Inglis had not lied—though she knew listeners would read certain things in her words.

“I see... It’s a shame,” Reddas said. “I had wanted to serve under your command. Simply being beside a form as beautiful as the moon in the night sky, in the company of the fragrance of the sweetest flower, would have been like heaven every day...”

The room went silent.

“Ah, er...! A-Anyway! Even though you won’t become the knight captain, I’ll still be able to fight by your side, right?!”

“Yes. When the time comes, we will fight together. When you need my strength, call on me.”

From Inglis’s perspective, being available to fight powerful foes without committing to any annoying responsibilities was an even better result than she could have hoped for. It was a dream come true. There were differences in the thinking of those who fought for a cause and those who fought for the sake of fighting—but that was fine. Each was good for the other. She had made the most of it, she thought.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me...” Inglis bowed deeply and left the audience chamber.

Chapter II: Inglis, Age 15—Dual Starlets (2)

As the pair left the audience chamber, Rafinha let out a deep sigh. “Well, that was a waste of time... I think you could have handled that better, but I guess you got what you wanted—all the fights and none of the hard work.”

“I think it works for both sides. This way they can use my power without any unnecessary shake-ups. Besides, I’m your squire, Rani. I don’t have time to be a knight captain.”

“Don’t use me as an excuse! You just didn’t want to deal with it!” Rafinha grabbed Inglis by the cheeks.

“Nop ih awwf! Stahh finching me!”

Rafinha locked eyes with her. “Really? Are you sure that was the right choice? Captain of the Royal Guard is a heck of a jump up the ladder! You’d have been equals with Rafael in the Paladins. Aunt Serena and Captain Luke would have been really proud of you—my parents and the people of Ymir too. Should you really have turned it down so quickly? If you’re that worried about me—”

This time Inglis pinched Rafinha’s cheeks. “It’s fine. I’m happy where I am. But you’re right, mother and father might be disappointed if they hear of it, so let’s not tell them, okay?” Then Inglis let go of her cousin’s cheeks and gently wrapped her arms around her.

“Yeah, sure,” Rafinha said with some hesitation. She let out a weary sigh. “Coming here really was meaningless...”

Grrrggg!

Grrrrrrggg!

Their stomachs rumbled in unison. Silence fell over them until one finally said, “Let’s head back.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

They continued walking toward the courtyard where the *Star Princess* was parked.

“Oho ho! Why, if it isn’t Inglis and Rafinha! It’s been so long!” a voice exclaimed in astonishment.

Inglis and Rafinha turned to see a slender middle-aged man in an eccentric outfit. They gasped.

“Y-You’re...!” Rafinha stammered.

It was the man who had helped them out in their hometown, Ymir. “Yes, indeeed! It is yours truuly, Count Weismar!” With a pleased strut, he approached the two girls.

The pair honestly found his demeanor to be a bit off-putting, but not particularly surprising. They were used to his oddities.

“Has it reeeally been two whooole years? Your performance in your hometown of Ymir still burns vividly in my heart!” he said, a huge smile taking over his face.

Count Weismar led a traveling theatrical troupe performing plays, songs, and dances. He came from a noble family, but they had lost their holdings during his grandfather’s time; he was the third generation to lead a traveling troupe. His title was more like a nickname or a stage name.

The Weismar Troupe had been performing for decades and was known all across the country as a result. The “Artistic Count,” as he was called, was quite famous. If he was visiting the palace, that meant he was planning a performance in the capital. When the Weismar Troupe had come to Ymir, Inglis and Rafinha had sung and danced on stage. They had been only thirteen at the time; the count had scouted them personally after they saved the troupe from a magicite beast attack while the group was on the road to Ymir.

Thanks to her time on stage, Inglis had gotten somewhat used to a crowd’s attention as she performed in a pretty costume. Back then, Rafinha had told her that meant she had matured as a girl. Inglis didn’t find the act of naturally being a treat for onlookers particularly pleasing.

“You two have only gotten even more beauuutiful over the past two years! But ohhh! What’s this? Tears on your cheeks?” Count Weismar asked.

“Wahhhh! Count Weismar!” Rafinha cried.

“Save us!” Inglis said.

The pair had a reason to feel this emotional seeing him. Back when they’d first met, Ymir was in the middle of a famine caused by a crop failure. The duke’s family, including Inglis and Rafinha, had limited their meals to set a good example for the citizens. They were as hungry today as they had been then. The Weismar Troupe had arrived with ample stores of food, offering the two girls a feast if they agreed to perform. That was really the only reason why they had participated at all.

So for them, they had a simple statement: anywhere Count Weismar went, full bellies followed.

Grrrrrrggg!

Grrrggg!

“My, my, my! The two of you are always so hungry when you appear before me. The troupe will be dining soon. Care to join us?”

“Yes! Please!” Inglis and Rafinha replied in unison.

“Oho...! Well then, you’re quite welcome—though of course, that also means you’ll be lending us a hand with our show in Chiral, hmm?”

“We’ll do anything! We just want to eat!”

“Wonderful! I’m quite thankful for your assistance! You two will be perfect for what we have planned. Fate must have brought us together! The heavens themselves conspired!”

Both Inglis and Rafinha couldn’t agree more.

“Yes! Absolutely!”

“It’s a blessing for us as well!”

Events turned out differently than they had imagined, but it looked like they could finally eat a full meal in the end. Even though they weren't going to stuff themselves with food from a palace feast, they were still relieved that they had come. Inglis thanked the gods for her reunion with Count Weismar. They had felt their lives slipping away in hunger, but now they were saved.



King Carlias had approved the Weismar Troupe's request to perform in the capital's grand theater, and so the group had laid claim to a room there to prepare. Because they had arrived in Chiral immediately after the Steelblood Front's raid, they were unaffected by the attack.

Now they were having dinner with Inglis and Rafinha once again.

"Mmmm! Viffih ooh! Ahm fo hla vi meh Houn Eymah aneh! (Mmmm! This is good! I'm so glad we met Count Weismar again!)" Rafinha mumbled, her mouth full of food.

Inglis agreed, chomping into her own meal. "Yullai, Rahi... Iff lyf laivih fuh huh hlave. (You're right, Rani... It's like rising from the grave.)"

The two shuddered in bliss as they reached for a platter piled high with fried chicken.

Nom! Nom! Nom, nom, nom, nom, nom, nom, nom!

The food on top was gone in no time at all. They held up the empty platter and called, "Seconds please!" with smiles.

"They're the same as ever..."

"They eat so much!"

"I think they've gotten even faster over the last two years..."

Many members of the troupe remembered Inglis and Rafinha from their performance in Ymir two years before, and they were shocked to see the pair now. They stopped their own meals to watch the two in amazement.

"All right, there's plenty more where that came from!" Count Weismar

insisted.

“Yaaay! Thank you, Count Weismar! ♪” Rafinha exclaimed.

“This really helps!” Inglis said.

“No, no, the pleasure is aaall miiine! Sleep well, eat well, laugh well! That’s the secret to your beauty, isn’t it? You two really have only gotten even mooore beautiful over the past two years! This is a small price to pay to have that beauty decorate my stage!”

He’s such a nice person, isn’t he? Inglis thought. *Just like before, Count Weismar’s generously feeding us with a grin on his face. He may be an eccentric with a strange outfit, strange mannerisms, and a strange voice, but to us, he’s an angel.*

“So, what will we be doing this time?” Rafinha asked the count while waiting for more food to arrive. “Singing and dancing again?”

“No, this time we’re putting on a play! A new one! With such an expansive theater available to us, I’d like to use it all for something with a lot of visceral motion!”

“Huh, sounds interesting!”

“So will there be lots of action on the stage?” Inglis asked.

“Indeed! Not only that, but with this much space, I’d like to incorporate a Flygear to make it even flashier! A performance that can be enjoyed by young and old, men and women alike!”

“That sounds nice!” Rafinha agreed. “I love flashy shows!”

“Just leave the fights to me,” Inglis said.

“Yees, yees, of course! I’m quite familiar with your abilities, so I’d like you to start by helping the troupe with fight choreography and Flygear piloting!” the count explained.

“I get it. Those are our areas of expertise,” Rafinha said.

“I think we can do that,” Inglis said.

“Furthermore, since you two are students at the knights’ academy, I was

wondering if you could put a word in and ask if we could make use of some Flygears. We have a few, but not enough.”

“Understood. I’ll ask the principal,” Inglis said.

“Even if she says no, we can lend you the *Star Princess*! It’s ours!” Rafinha burst out in pride.

“Wait, you want them to use it for the show? The kids in town didn’t seem to like it...” Inglis mumbled.

“Some of them did! Why do you focus so much on negativity? Why not the positive opinions too?” Rafinha pouted.

“Oho! A truly fabulous Flygear like that would be perfect!” Count Weismar said, obviously in favor. “I fell for it at first sight! That would be wonderful!”

“Okay...” Inglis acquiesced. *He seems like he’s enthusiastic about anything and everything. Is this a good idea? Well, maybe that kind of willingness to try new things is important for art. I confess I’m out of my depth in this field...*

“Does that mean we’re more behind the scenes this time around?” Rafinha asked. “I would’ve liked a role on stage, but...”

“I’m fine with being behind the scenes,” Inglis chimed in.

“What are you saying?!” Count Weismar replied. “Of course you’ll be onstage as well! There’s no way I could let such beauty as yours go to waste!”

“Calling me ‘beautiful’ makes me all the more eager to perform!” Rafinha giggled.

“But wouldn’t we be taking someone else’s role, then?” Inglis asked.

“Why, of course not! There’s no problem at all! Wherever we go, if there are people suitable for the role, we ask them to join us on stage—it draws the locals into the performance! That’s how we do things. The audience’s satisfaction comes first! Though of course there aren’t many who fit my vision... Anyway, don’t worry about it!”

“I see...” Inglis said.

“Now, here’s the script for this show! I’d like one of you to be the heroine,

Maribelle!”

“The heroine?! That’s a major role!” Rafinha remarked.

“It is, yeah...” Inglis looked over the script Count Weismar handed her. *At a glance, it’s a tale of two men competing for the hand of a girl named Maribelle. Their conflict culminates in a fierce clash. There’s even a Flygear battle. It’s quite a tour de force. And in the end, one of the men emerges victorious and gains Maribelle’s hand...*

“Oh, wow! There’s even a kiss at the end!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“Whaaat?!” Inglis screamed. “That’s— Wow, there really is! Er, Count Weismar... Can we revise this?”

“Absolutely not! That kiss is necessary for artistic expression! I simply cannot compromise my vision!”

“Ugh...” Inglis groaned.

“I think you’d look better as Maribelle, Chris... But if you really don’t want to do it, I can play her,” Rafinha offered. Then she turned to the count. “Would that be okay with you, sir?”

“Why, of course, I don’t mind at all! You have your own charm, Rafinha!” Count Weismar replied.

“Huh?!” Inglis gasped. “Wait, that’s no good either! Rani’s too young for that! I promised the duke I’d take good care of her!”

“Then why don’t you play her, Chris?” Rafinha asked.

“Ugh...” *I don’t want to do that either. This is bad. I don’t want Rafinha to do it, but imagining myself in that scene gives me the chills. But the kiss is here to stay, and if we pull out of the performance—*

“Of course, if neither of you can play the role, unfortunately I won’t be able to keep feeding you either,” Count Weismar said.

“Aghhhh!” *That’s bad too! I don’t want to feel hungry like that again!* “L-Let us think about it, please!” Inglis said.

“Why of course! Just give me an answer in two or three days!”

“Th-Thank you...”

There was time to consider the matter—but it was developing into a real problem.



The next morning, Inglis and Rafinha brought Count Weismar to see Principal Miriela. Her office was, of course, also a victim of the destruction that had ripped apart the school building, so the pair of girls brought the count to the building site, where she was directly overseeing the reconstruction.

“Whaaat?! You want to use the academy’s Flygears for the troupe’s performance?”

“Yes indeed! I’d heard that there was a major battle in the capital recently. I’m sure that must have put a frown on the faces of the people—we must do something to lift their spirits!” As usual, Count Weismar spoke in a high-pitched voice while gesticulating strangely—but how would Principal Miriela reply? She was an understanding person, but also a very serious one. Inglis and Rafinha wondered if they were about to hear an immediate refusal.

“Wow! That’s a wonderful idea! I love plays! And I’ve seen the Weismar Troupe so many times! I’m a big fan of yours!”

It turned out she was all for it.

“Well, then! Thank you very much! Hearing that makes my heart sing!”

“So if we cooperate, I presume we’ll get tickets or something?” Miriela asked.

“But of course! Box seats for everyone at the knights’ academy! You’ll be able to see it as much as you like!”

“Wow, box seats! ♪ We’ll cooperate fully!”

Silva, the only current student with a special-class Rune, raised his voice. “Principal Miriela! Wait a moment!” He was present because he was also being asked to work closely with the troupe. Several other students were gathered as well.

“Oh? Is something the matter, Silva?” Miriela asked.

“Of course there is! Don’t be lured in by petty trinkets! We’re in the middle of rebuilding! This isn’t the time for that!”

Silva was serious to a fault. His objection to Principal Miriela’s decision did not come as a surprise.

“No, this is precisely what’s needed now!” she insisted. “We can’t exactly have classes without classrooms, so we may as well enjoy ourselves while we can! With things how they are, some of us may be feeling down too—this will cheer us up! Right?”

“Yes! Count Weismar is really good at that!” Rafinha interjected as she raised her hand. “Right, Chris?”

“Exactly right.”

“For you two, it’s probably just because he’s filling your bellies,” Leone commented.

Liselotte smiled in amusement. “You seem like completely different people from yesterday.”

Silva still wasn’t convinced. “B-But the knights’ academy is a public institution. Without His Majesty’s direct approval or evidence of this clearly being for the public good—”

“Mm-hm-hmm!” Count Weismar took a step closer to Silva with an animated gesture. “No worries, my boooy! We, the Weismar Troupe, perform for the world and its people! On the surface where the Prism Flow terrorizes the people, the threat of magicite beasts is omnipresent. Our troupe exists to bring respite from those fears. That is our duty!”

“That’s a noble cause, but...”

“As you come to understand our work better, I’m sure you’ll understand! So, how about it? Will you stand on stage? Not only is your special-class Rune impressive, but you’ve quite the striking appearance as well. The highlight of this play is its visceral combat scenes, so you’d be perfect!”

“No, I—”

“Wow! Silva as an actor?” Principal Miriela interjected. “That sounds great!”

“But, Principal Miriela, I have no interest in such frivolity!” Silva protested.

“It’s not frivolous. Exposure to the arts enriches one’s personality! I’m sure it will be a good influence for you!”

Passing nearby, Yua happened to have overheard them as she carried an absurd number of logs in her arms on top of her shoulders. Because of her slender build, the sight would have surprised anyone unfamiliar with her. “Maybe it’d do something about your temper. That’d be nice,” she muttered under her breath. She was as strong as ever. She seemed to be fine after her encounter with the Prismer that destroyed the school.

She really is the perfect sparring opponent, Inglis thought. I need to figure out a way to make her chest bigger so she’ll fight me. She promised to take me on if whatever I come up with works for her.

“I’m not angry for the sake of being angry! You’re the one with the foul attitude!” Silva shot back.

“Huh?” As Yua lazily tilted her head in confusion, a long log she was carrying smashed into Silva’s shins. “Ah, sorry.”

“Ow...! That’s exactly what I mean!”

“Now, now, Silva. We have a guest. Let’s be civil,” Miriela chided. “That said, since he’s giving you the opportunity, I think you should go for it.”

“Indeed!” Count Weismar said. “It will be fine! Inglis will be on stage as well!”

“She will?!” Silva gasped.

“Wow! Even Inglis is taking part? I suppose I can’t deny she would look great on stage... You have an excellent eye for talent, Weismar,” Miriela said.

“Mm-hm! Actually, this isn’t Inglis’s first time being in one of our performances! I’ve been looking forward to having her on stage again!”

“Ohhh? Inglis, do your best!” Miriela cheered.

“I-I never said...” Inglis still wasn’t sure whether she’d agree to perform. There was one big problem. One very big problem.

“There’s even a kiss at the end! Right, Chris?”

“W-Wait, Rani, I still haven’t—”

“Whaaat?!” The group gasped at Rafinha’s sudden revelation.

“Inglis—kissing? I’m surprised she took the role,” Leone remarked.

“Indeed. In front of so many people?” Liselotte said.

The two of them went back and forth. “Even if it’s for a play, that’s quite bold... Wow, I’m picturing it now.”

“Yes, it makes me a little nervous just thinking about it... I don’t think I could do that...”

“D-Do your best, Inglis...”

“I’ll have to pay close attention for future reference.”

Leone and Liselotte’s cheeks flushed. They were strangely excited. As healthy growing girls, it seemed they couldn’t help but be interested.

“No, I haven’t committed yet...” Inglis said weakly.

“And you will be her counterpart!” Count Weismar clapped a hand on Silva’s shoulder.

“Ohhh!” The other students gasped again.

“Wha—?! There’s no way I could do that! That’s absurd! I refuse!”

“Well... I think it would be easier for Chris to work with you, since she knows you...” Rafinha said.

“That’s not the problem!” Inglis and Silva replied in unison.

“Then I guess your first time should be with Rafael? But he’s deployed right now, and this doesn’t count anyway. It’s just a play. But maybe when he hears about it, he’ll start seriously making moves on you ’cause he’ll think you’re getting away? Ooh, the day when we’ll really be sisters is drawing closer! ♪ Wait, Chris, why are you shrinking back like that?”

“Ugh...” Every word that her friends had said had given Inglis the chills. The more she thought about it, the more fearsome kissing a guy in front of a crowd became. It was just too scary. No matter who the guy in question was, it was just something she fundamentally couldn’t do.

“Is there anything I can offer to make this possible?” Count Weismar asked Silva.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t! I refuse!”

“Well, if Silva’s that insistent... Would anyone else here like to kiss Inglis?” Principal Miriela asked the other students present.

“Me, me!” A forest of hands shot up as the gazes of the male students washed over Inglis.

“Wow! You’re so popular, Chris! ♪”

“Eeeeeek!” Inglis shuddered as a chill ran up her spine. *I could really do without these hungry stares*, she thought.

“Wow, Inglis. People really like you!” Pullum said. Then her gaze pulled elsewhere. “Ah! No raising your hand, Lahti! You weren’t, right?”

Pullum was in the same class year as Inglis but in the knights’ program, while Lahti was in the squires’ program with Inglis. The two, exchange students from a northern country, were childhood friends and usually very close. And now Pullum looked at Lahti chidingly.

“Of course I wasn’t. I’m not interested in that,” Lahti insisted.

“Good. Anything else to say for yourself?” Pullum tilted her ear toward Lahti.

“Huh?”

“Maybe something like, ‘I’ve only got eyes for one woman!’”

“No way!”

In the midst of this chaos, a voice rose above.

“If Silva won’t participate, then I volunteer!” Reddas, captain of the Royal Guard, made his presence known.

“Reddas?!” Inglis gasped.

“Yes! I see you’re in high spirits today, Lady Inglis.” Reddas bowed politely to her.

Silva looked a bit annoyed. “Brother... Why are you here?! Are you still

worrying about me?! There's no need. Go back to your duties!"

"No, my duty is here. I'm not here to check on you, Silva. I'm here for Inglis."

"Inglis? But why?" Silva asked.

"Well, Lady Inglis promised His Majesty that she will come to our aid in times of crisis. Thus, we must prepare for emergencies by remaining in contact, such that she can respond immediately. Therefore, Lady Inglis, I and other members of the Royal Guard will visit you from time to time."

"Ah, yes..." Inglis found that a bit troublesome, but it was welcome to know that she'd be called on if anything happened. Anything that was a national crisis would probably involve a good fight. "But I can't have you staring at me all the time, so please limit your trips."

"Why, of course! I won't cause you any trouble!"

"Okay, but no peeking!" Rafinha chimed in.

"Why, of course not! I'm sure someone like Lady Inglis would sense me there, so that would be impossible anyway."

"Are you sure? Chris gets so distracted when she's in front of a mirror. She's actually completely vulnerable—"

"Rani! You don't have to tell him that!"

"Oh! I see, Lady Inglis is defenseless in front of a mirror," Reddas said. "That's quite the—"

"Brother, I don't understand. Why must you take such an interest in Inglis?" Silva interrupted.

"Well. During the recent incident with the Steelbloods, Lady Inglis was quite helpful to His Majesty and the Royal Guard. His Majesty was quite impressed, so he offered Lady Inglis command of the Royal Guard."

"Huuuh?! Command of the Royal Guard?!" The gasps of surprise were nearly shrieks.

"Inglis as captain of the Royal Guard?! What a meteoric rise!" Leone remarked.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing...but...” Liselotte trailed off.

“She... She probably is qualified,” Silva admitted.

“However...she turned it down due to the potential ramifications,” Reddas said.

“She turned it down?!” everyone yelled.

“That said, she promised to lend her aid in emergencies. That’s why we need to stay in touch.”

“Why, that’s... Inglis, are you sure? I’m a bit grateful that my brother doesn’t have to step down, but...” Silva began.

“Hmph. Don’t be so petty, Silva!” Reddas scolded. “Lady Inglis has incredible combat capabilities, a cool head, and she’s stunningly beautiful! I simply can’t compare! Thinking calmly, I’d love to serve under Lady Inglis! If you ever change your mind, the position of captain is yours!”

“No thanks,” Inglis demurred.

“Then I’ll visit you like this from time to time! Just seeing you and hearing your voice will blow away the fatigue of daily life!”

“Err...”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been this enthused about anyone but my younger brother Silva! It makes me feel young again!”

Silva paused. “I guess I owe you one, Inglis.”

“What do you mean, Silva?” she asked, confused.

“My brother’s always been overprotective. If he’s focused on you, I’ll have a little more freedom.”

She was stunned into silence.

Well, speaking objectively, I do have the looks, she thought. “Stunning beauty” isn’t overstating it. I can fight far better than the Royal Guard too—at least the ones I’ve seen in action. So I can understand why Reddas is such a fan, but...that doesn’t make this attention feel good.

“But turning down such a post is such a shame... There’s no higher honor...”

Miriela said.

“This is Inglis we’re talking about... I’m not that surprised...” Leone said.

“Wait! Wait, Inglis! Are you really sure?” Miriela shot an intense gaze at her.

“Yes.”

Miriela stepped closer to whisper quietly enough for only Inglis to hear.

“Please, tell me! Why would you turn down such a wonderful offer?”

“It’s a long story...”

“Ah, it’s okay to keep it short. Just tell me how you really felt, I won’t get mad.”

“I suppose. To keep it to one sentence...”

“Yes, yes?”

“It sounded like a lot of work.”

“Aha ha ha... I see... I suppose you’ve made up your mind...” The principal laughed dryly. “For a student at an academy meant to train knights to then turn down the highest knightly position because it sounded like a lot of work... I wonder why you’re even here... It must be a philosophical thing...”

“To watch over Rani as she grows and to improve myself by experiencing many battles. I think this is a good environment for that.”

“But Rafinha has a strong focus. If anything, I think she’s more mature than you.”

“Thank you for praising Rani.”

Principal Miriela sighed. “That’s not what I meant, but you’re choosing to ignore my point...”

“Yes. I feel no desire to change.”

“I-I see...”

As Inglis and Principal Miriela spoke, Reddas conversed with Count Weismar. “Anyway, Lord Weismar! If Silva says he won’t do it, use me instead! Ah, Lady Inglis... Ahhhhh...”

“I refuse!” Inglis cut in. *The idea makes me feel sick. Just—no. I don’t want to do a stage kiss with anyone, but especially not him.*

“Huh...?! Well, if Lady Inglis says so, understood! I won’t accept such a rude plotline! Count Weismar, rewrite your script!”

“Oh...” That was an abrupt about-face, but it worked in Inglis’s favor. As long as the kiss was gone, she could eat as much as she wanted and perform without any worries.

“I cannot! It’s artistically necessary!” Count Weismar insisted. He would not budge on that. “I’ll certainly accept the leading lady’s input on casting, but I will not change the plot!”

“Well...” *What do I do?* Inglis wondered. *Is there a way to make this work?*

Yua, who had been watching the whole time, murmured in her ear. “I’m jealous.”

“Huh? What do you mean, Yua?”

“You get to pick a cute guy to kiss, right? Must be nice.”

Of course that was what Yua focused on. After all, her motivation for increasing her chest size was to attract that kind of attention.

“Then Yua can do it instead of me— Ah! No! Wait!” Inglis felt a spark of inspiration rush through her mind. A good plan. No, a great one. A wonderful realization. “What if instead of me...both Yua and I have a role?!”

“Huh?” This was news to Yua.

“Count Weismar! I have a casting suggestion!” Inglis announced enthusiastically.

“Mm! Of course I’ll listen to your suggestion as our leading lady, Inglis! It will help produce better art!”

“Yes! I’ll step down from the heroine role!”

“Nooo! Wait, Chris, what are you doing?! Our food’s on the line!” Rafinha yelled, the point of her concern obvious.

“I know, Rani. Count Weismar, instead let me play the role that Silva turned

down!”

“Ohhh?! But then who will be the heroine?”

“Have one of the men take the role!”

“A man?!”

“Yes. What I mean is, we should make the ‘heroine,’ Maribelle, male. And instead, women shall play the leads who compete for her!”

“So, reverse the genders of the cast, you mean?”

“Yes. That way, the script won’t need to be changed! Count Weismar, you’ve already said that the highlight of the show will be the flashy fights, so that’s what we should focus on. With all due respect, when it comes to fighting or piloting a Flygear, I can do it better than any of the troupe. I’ll put on a display that will satisfy the audience!”

“Well, that makes sense. Your fighting style is both beautiful and gallant—it’s sure to please the crowd,” Reddas said, nodding.

“Your prowess certainly is wonderful... Thinking back, I initially scouted you after having seen you fight,” Count Weismar recalled.

“The time has come for women to be strong as well,” Inglis said. “Being flowers doted over by men is too old-fashioned! We must show the strength and will to reach out for what we ourselves want! I’d like to show that to the audience!”

“Oh, my... Yes!” Count Weismar agreed, enthusiastic.

“We will not decide in advance who, between me and my rival, wins! But the victor will be the one who wins the kiss! By leaving it out of the script, we’ll be able to show the impact of a real fight!”

“Ah... What a novel suggestion! So avant-garde! It excites me!”

“Wait, doesn’t that just make it a carnival show instead of a play?” Silva asked.

“If you have a real fight on stage, Inglis, you’ll probably destroy the theater...” Leone remarked.

Liselotte agreed. “Let us not forget the crowd in the crossfire either...”

“Ssshhh! Quiet! This is a new kind of play! It’s art!” Inglis asserted.

“Indeed! Such an interesting experiment! No progress can be made without facing new challenges! So, Inglis, will Rafinha play your rival?” Count Weismar asked.

“M-Me...?” Rafinha asked. “I think I’d rather be a cute heroine...”

“No! Not Rani!” Inglis barked. If Rafinha were cast as her rival, one of the two would participate in the kiss during the resolution. And Inglis absolutely wanted to avoid that for either of them. The goal was to avoid the kiss while appearing and earning as much as they could eat, so that would be completely counterproductive. And there was one other goal for her proposal.

“But who, then?” Count Weismar asked.

“Yes. I’d like to suggest Yua to play my rival.” Inglis pointed straight at Yua.

“Wha...?” Yua said, staring off in surprise.

Inglis swiftly moved closer to whisper in her ear. “Yua, this is your chance to kiss a guy you like! He’ll probably listen to our suggestions for who to cast.”

“Ohhh... *I* get to pick? From a *wide* selection? So I get to pick a cute guy?”

“Yes! But you will have to fight me for real on stage—if you want the kiss, take me down.”

“I’m in. I’ll do it. This is something interesting for once.” Yua laughed. She even smiled faintly, a rarity for the girl who usually looked bored. She really was interested.

“All right! Thank you!” Inglis got a great deal out of this too. This was a great way to fight Yua as much as she wanted. She could fight on stage until satisfied, and when the time was right, let Yua have the kiss. This way she’d be able to avoid the kiss herself, earn all the food she wanted for performing, and get the real match against Yua she’d been longing for—three birds with one stone. A wonderful plan, if she did say so herself. “Count Weismar, please change the cast and their roles.”

“Yes, yes, *of cooourse*! Indeed I shall! I’m getting more and more excited

about this!” the count cheered.

“That’s no fair, Chris. You’re just getting to do what you want,” Rafinha whined.

“Aha ha... Well, playing a heroine who gets to rampage across the stage does suit Inglis better than playing a meek, adorable one,” Leone said.

“You’re quite clever. I don’t think many people would have brought things in that particular direction, though,” Liselotte said.

“I don’t think it has anything to do with being clever. It’s just Chris being Chris.” Rafinha pouted.

“Well, you would know her best, Rafinha,” Leone admitted.

“Anyway, we should help out too...”

“Yeah. Maybe as Flygear flight instructors?” Rafinha suggested to the two of them.

“No. Leone’s right, the theater could well be destroyed. So our job should be to use our Artifacts to make a barrier and keep everyone safe,” Liselotte said.

“Yes, that may be necessary,” Leone added.

As Rafinha and the others discussed their own plans, Count Weismar turned to the rest and raised his voice. “Then, Yua, I’d like you to show us what you can do! I’m sure Inglis’s recommendation is correct, but I’d love to see for myself!”

“Of course! That’s only natural!” Inglis agreed.

“Mm... Okay.” Yua didn’t seem to mind either.

My long-held wish is finally being fulfilled! This is how it has to be! This will be fun!

Inglis and Yua faced each other at a short distance.

“Now, make sure to hold back, you two! We’re rebuilding the school building here. Don’t destroy it even further!” Principal Miriela warned.

“Yes, ma’am.” Inglis laughed and smiled gracefully.

Her match with Yua was finally here. She couldn’t keep the grin off her face;

her excitement was at its peak. Now that she'd worked her way around the impending kiss, there was nothing left but to eat well, fight well, and enjoy herself!

"Okay, Yua! Let's show Count Weismar what we can do, so he can feel comfortable giving us the leading roles!"

"Yep, Boobies."

Inglis stared, unmoving. *I do wish she'd call me something else.*

She had been so excited, but that had soured the mood. Now that she thought about it, Yua acted that way to everyone. Would she be able to remember her lines and the stage directions? Inglis was a little worried.

Well, even if she has some trouble remembering, I'm sure the fight she can put up will make up for it.

Yua was the real thing—she could do things that Inglis couldn't comprehend. Even when the larval Prismer had swallowed Yua, it hadn't overpowered her; she had merely been caught off guard by a special power her foe had. It had been a bad matchup. For Inglis, Yua could be a more enjoyable opponent than said Prismer.

"Er, umm... In...Ing..."

"Yes. 'Inglis.' Do you remember now?"

"Yeah. I think I should at least remember the name of someone who saved me."

"Ohh! Thank you." Inglis hadn't expected Yua to care about such things. That was a pleasant surprise.

"Okay, then, In...Inbies."

"Ah...! No, wait! You're mixing them up, Yua!"

"Hm? Hmm. How about Booglis? Maybe that."

"Stop it! You're embarrassing me! Just go back to what you had before!" It was embarrassing being called "Boobies," but weird combinations of it were even worse. Inglis's cheeks had flushed before she realized it.

“Aha ha ha! That’s perfect! Do your best, Booglis!” Rafinha snickered.

“Rani! Stop that!”

“Ha ha ha, Chris is mad!”

“Stop that, Rafinha—Inglis isn’t enjoying it,” Leone chided.

“So you have one more on your side—Leone. Ah, I mean Boobone,” Rafinha continued.

“Stop that! Leave me out of it!” Leone protested, her face red.

“Anyway, Yua.” Inglis focused her attention on her opponent. “Enough about names. Let’s get this started.”

“Yeah. Got it.” Yua stood there just as casually as before. Yua was the kind of person who didn’t take a combat stance while fighting. Her motions took on an almost trudging affect, yet they were too fast to see. Her blows seemed to lightly brush opponents, but they were earth-shattering. Her observed behavior and the results didn’t match at all. So even when staring her down, Inglis couldn’t get a good sense of what Yua could do.

Hieral menaces like Eris, Ripple, and Sistia had their own characteristics that were intimidating in different ways, but Yua wasn’t like that. As far as Inglis could tell, Yua was a normal human being. That was fascinating.

The unknown, the unfathomed—crossing fists with such a being could awaken new ideas or new techniques within Inglis.

“Should I start?” After a pause, Yua crooked her neck.

“Yes! Go ahead!” Inglis braced herself and awaited Yua’s approach. She was naturally still maintaining an increased pull of gravity on herself. The more she kept it up, the better the training it provided. There was no reason to release it now.

When viewed from its end, life was over in the blink of an eye. Inglis knew this, having already lived a full life. Not a single moment could be wasted. She had to keep improving herself. By doing so, she could go further and reach greater heights.

“Kay...” Yua’s voice faded to a whisper.

“Ready.” Then it suddenly came back, loud and clear, directly in Inglis’s ear. In an instant, Yua had slid up directly to her side.

“Ah!”

Yua had seemed to disappear. Inglis should have at least heard her footsteps or felt the change in the air on her skin. Yet she hadn’t at all realized Yua had moved. Yua had approached with no signs of doing so.

And now, one of Yua’s light yet powerful strikes was aimed at Inglis’s side.

Before Yua could touch her, Inglis moved her arm to block. “Haaaah!” Yua’s palm brushed against it.

Thump!

Inglis felt an incredible impact. “Ugh...!” she grunted as the shock blew her away. Even when sent flying, in the middle of this fight she’d longed for, her eyes were sparkling.

“Ahh, this is amazing!” Yua had used an opening move that the opponent couldn’t react to. It had been so fast, yet so strong!

It had been incredible to experience. Yua had completely hidden any sense of her approach. Inglis thought Yua must truly possess some fearsome techniques even though she didn’t appear to be focusing on much at all. It was everything Inglis had hoped for. This would be a wonderful way to push her limits.

Joyfully reflecting on that instant, Inglis flew into the scaffolding—the very same scaffolding that was being rebuilt.

Blammmmm! Crrrack! Crummmble!

“Eeeeeek! Not the school building!” Principal Miriela’s shriek of dismay echoed throughout the area.

“Ahhh! Such incredible power! Amazing!” Count Weismar gaped wide-eyed at Yua.

“I can’t believe she blew Chris away like that!”

“A-Amazing! Yua’s even more amazing than I thought!” Leone exclaimed.

“Perhaps Yua’s normally so relaxed because she has so much power...?” Liselotte guessed. “I’m impressed. She’s quite serious when the situation calls for it.”

“Tee hee.” Yua puffed out her chest in pride.

Meanwhile, Principal Miriela cradled her head in her hands. “Ahhhhh, the school building! Now we have to start over from scratch there...”

“Worry about Chris rather than that, Principal Miriela!”

“I’m okay, Rani!”

Thud!

The broken scaffolding shook even harder as Inglis forcefully leaped up from it. “You’re amazing, Yua! You didn’t give me a chance to react, and the arm I blocked with is still tingling!” Inglis’s eyes gleamed with excitement, but Yua looked at her quizzically.

“You aren’t hurt? I knocked out Four-Eyes in one hit...”

“Th-They don’t need to hear that!” Silva exclaimed angrily. “I may be slender, but I’m confident in my sturdiness.”

“Well... Wanna try again?” Yua asked Inglis.

Seeing Yua ready to move, Silva muttered, “I think Inglis needs to go on the attack. To do otherwise is dangerous!”

“Huh? What do you mean, Silva?” Rafinha turned to him, waiting for his explanation.

“You’d understand if you faced her. As hard as it is to follow her from here, her attacks are even harder to read when you’re the one fighting her. She closes in imperceptibly, without a trace, and then unleashes a powerful attack before you even notice. If you’re able to react in time, you still may be able to

do something, but that's difficult. Inglis responded well—shockingly well, in fact. Well, perhaps it's not too shocking when we remember what Inglis can do, but I don't know if she can persist for long."

"So you're saying she should attack before she's put on the defensive?"

"Yes, precisely." Silva nodded to Rafinha. "Inglis, don't go on the defensive! It's hard to read her attacks! Offense is the best defense!"

"Okay, Silva! Thanks for the warning!" But even responding in that way, Inglis didn't make a move herself. One, two, then three seconds of empty time passed.

"Huh?" Yua, who had slightly prepared to counterattack, crooked her neck in confusion.

"Why?! Why won't you attack?" Silva asked.

"That's Chris for you... If you tell her that, she's absolutely going to do the opposite," Rafinha noted.

"I see... Yes, that sounds like Inglis," Leone agreed.

"She's such a pain sometimes," Liselotte followed, as she and the others laughed wryly.

"You're correct. This is how I do things. Thanks to you, I've decided how to fight." Inglis flashed a grin.

Fighting and growing meant taking on an opponent and overcoming them when they had the advantage. That was how one improved oneself. If offense was the best defense, then she absolutely would not be the first to attack. She was going to stay on the defensive and prove it could be done!

"Ahhh! I knew it! Her dainty figure, her bold and dynamic movement! Just watching her makes me tremble!" Reddas said, his eyes glued to Inglis.

Inglis groaned internally. *You can think what you want, but try not to say it out loud.* Reddas was acting up again. "Silva, could you do something about Reddas?"

"Understood. Sorry to bother you like that. Come on, brother, keep it down." Silva sighed as he placed a hand over Reddas's mouth.

“Mmph! Mrrrmph!”

Now I can at least focus, Inglis thought.

“May I go ahead?” Yua asked.

“Yes, please!” Inglis replied.

Yua went on the attack again. Inglis quickly took a stance to intercept her. This time, she released the enhanced gravity magic she’d applied to herself and conjured a sword made from ice. She usually formed it as a one-handed blade, but this time it was a two-handed sword and nearly as tall as she was. She was able to adjust the size of the sword now—her control over her powers was still improving, proof of her daily training. She’d have preferred to do so while weighing herself down with gravity magic, but she wasn’t to that point yet.

“It doesn’t matter how big it is if you can’t hit me,” Yua murmured quietly. She went to move.

“Correct, but that’s not what this is for!” Inglis deftly tossed the greatsword she’d just created and followed with a smooth high kick.

Craaassshhh!

Despite the kick’s graceful appearance, its power was overwhelming. The ice sword shattered into countless pieces. The grains of ice glittered, swirling through the air like powdered snow. The reason Inglis had made the blade bigger was to increase the area she could cover through this technique. This was to help her see Yua’s movements through the movement of ice crystals.

If that nearly-impossible-to-follow movement was physical, she’d see it in the movement of the ice. And if it was magical, then the ice itself had a bit of mana as well, so it would react to the flow of Yua’s magic. Either way, Inglis would detect the attack ahead of time.

If I used Aether Shell, it would probably let me take Yua’s attack without even flinching, but that would be a waste. It’s important to put myself in situations that require ingenuity, in order to wring as much personal growth as possible from the fight.

“There!” To the left and behind!

There was no physical change, but Inglis could sense the flow of mana shudder faintly. Even without physically seeing anything, Inglis spun in that direction with a roundhouse kick.

An instant later, Yua appeared in its trajectory, and the kick struck home!

“Gah!”

Smaaashhh!

This time it was Yua sent flying headfirst into the scaffolding surrounding the school building.

“Eeeeek! Again?!” Principal Miriela shrieked in dismay once more.

“Inglis not only reacted, but she intercepted Yua’s attack?! Even I couldn’t manage to do that!” Silva’s eyes widened.

I guess that makes sense, Inglis thought. Yua’s start to her attack seems to be almost magical. My mana-charged ice wasn’t shifted by wind, but by mana. If she had charged in physically, it would have produced a breeze and scattered the ice.

The surface-dwellers of the current era had lost their ability to sense mana. Although Artifacts allowed them to indirectly channel that lost power, they relied solely on Artifacts. It made sense that Silva, unable to sense the flow of mana, couldn’t react in time. Additionally, Yua had excellent technique. Inglis had only sensed a small flow of power. She’d had to shatter the greatsword she’d made in order to make it easier to sense how Yua was moving. Even Inglis needed some kind of aid.

Usually, magical teleportation or the like required a great deal of power, but Yua had used very little—she’d nearly hidden it in the natural flow of mana. The result was a move that was terribly difficult to evade.

“Having seen what I did the other day, I realized it was obvious I can never catch up to Inglis...but the difference being this great makes me ashamed.” Silva

struggled to hold back a tortured expression.

Have I done something wrong here? Inglis wondered. *Hmm, no, I don't think so.*

Smack!

Rafinha clapped a hand on Silva's back.

"Ow! Wh-What was that for?!"

"You and Inglis are different people! Right? If you have the power to protect what you want to protect, isn't that enough?"

Silva's eyes widened.

"But that doesn't mean you should give up on yourself! So quit staring at your feet, take a close look, and learn, right? Well, sometimes it's hard to follow what's happening, but still..."

After a pause, Silva said, "Yeah. You're right. Thanks." He turned his gaze forward again. "You don't get discouraged easily. That's a reliable trait."

"I'm just used to Chris. We grew up together." Rafinha grinned.

As Inglis watched them out of the corner of her eye, those eyes arched up into a smile. Rafinha was a good girl, she wasn't selfish, and she believed in herself, as Silva had noticed. She was kind, fearless, and caring. On the other hand, she was a bit naive, and her manners were sometimes lacking...

All in all, my choice to teach myself by staying with her was the right thing to do. Secretly, Inglis was proud of herself.

But now Inglis needed to direct her attention to Yua, who should have been somewhere in the scaffolding around the school building.

"Yua! Are you oka—"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Her voice came from directly behind Inglis.

"...?!"

Thud!

Yua slammed her shoulder directly into Inglis's back. The shards of the ice sword had all fallen to the ground, so Inglis had been slow to detect the change in mana. She found herself flying away again, straight toward the scaffolding.

"Not this time!" Inglis twisted herself forcefully, planted a foot on the scaffolding, and sprung back to the fight.

"Good. The principal would have been mad." Yua was already above Inglis, winding up a kick.

Inglis gasped. She had little time to react to the forceful impact, only crossing her arms just in time.

Whaaam!

Inglis's body slammed straight down into the ground. She managed to land on her feet, but her legs shook fiercely. Yua's kick had hit her hard.

"Now I'll do combos. If I do that, you won't be able to counterattack," Yua said.

She was right. If Inglis didn't have time to scatter mana-infused ice, she wouldn't be able to sense Yua. Even if she did it again, the effect would last only until the ice grains fell. Yua merely had to keep her distance until then. It was unlikely that Inglis would be able to rely on that trick again.

"Inglis is at a disadvantage!" Silva yelled.

However, that observation was wrong.

"How about this?" Inglis closed her eyes tightly.

She caught Yua's incoming fist in her palm.

Clang!

The echoes told how forceful the blow had been.

“You closed your eyes?!” Yua gasped. Inglis could sense her shock.

“Wh-What?!” Silva seemed shocked too.

“This way, I can tell easier!” Inglis knew that Yua’s movements weren’t just physical; they relied on mana. It was the flow of mana that she needed to pay attention to. Mana wasn’t seen with the eyes; it was sensed.

Information gleaned from only one’s vision clouded the picture. By cutting it out, she was able to increase her sensitivity to mana and respond to Yua’s movement. If she hadn’t shattered an ice sword to track Yua, she never would have realized that. So doing that had been necessary in its own way.

“Haaah!”

“Choaaaaaah!”

Bam! Blam! Boom!

Inglis’s and Yua’s strikes roared throughout the area.

As Yua drew back from their even exchange of blows, she let out a sigh. “I can’t finish you like this, huh. Guess I gotta be stronger...”

For some reason, Yua’s presence felt different.

Inglis opened her eyes and saw that Yua’s eyes were faintly shining. They looked like a rainbow...

“Oooh!” She didn’t hide her excitement.

Yua definitely still has more in her! Wonderful—! I want to see more and more of how she fights for real!

Crrrack! Crummmble!

Something huge was collapsing behind Inglis.

Everybody else seemed to realize as well, letting out a collective, “Oh.”

The scaffolding around the school building had finally had enough. It fell in a giant crash, completely gone. Inglis's prior leap off of it could have been the fatal blow.

"Ahhh! Oh nooooo! Didn't I tell you this would happen?! No more!" Miriela shrieked, needing to put an end to the matter. "You've seen enough, right, Count Weismar?!"

"Y-Yes! Both of you were wonderful! To be honest, I was overwhelmed! I'm sure the audience will love it! So, Inglis and Yua, I'd like you two to take the lead roles!"

"All right! This way I can..." Yua trailed off into giggles as a smile crossed her face.

Inglis nodded. "I'd love to keep going...but let's call it for today." She was a bit disappointed, but she had managed to set things up how she wanted. She could be happy with that. That she was going to avoid a kiss, earn meals, and fight Yua again—the next time on stage—wasn't bad either.

"But first! I want you two to fix that destroyed scaffolding! If you don't, the academy won't assist in this production! Okay?!" Principal Miriela's eyebrows were raised and her cheeks puffed out.

The sight struck fear into the pair. They had no choice but to nod in agreement.

"Okayyy..."

Chapter III: Inglis, Age 15—Dual Starlets (3)

Life was busy several days later at the Royal Theater.

The knights' academy had decided to fully cooperate with the Weismar Troupe for their production. The academy had already arranged the delivery of Flygears and other supplies for the play. All over the theater, everything from people to props were moving around at a frantic pace. Count Weismar had rapidly finished the adjustments to the script, made necessary by Inglis's proposal for the cast. And today, they were being fitted for costumes.

"Wow! You look great, Chris! You really do look good in anything!" Rafinha squealed, her eyes sparkling.

Inglis was playing the character Maribelle, a well-known dancer in the setting's locale. The character's name hadn't changed from when she had been originally cast as the sole heroine in the plot, but her background had changed from a young noblewoman to a dancer because Count Weismar wanted to have Inglis dance for the audience by replicating a scene the troupe had done in Ymir.

"Thanks, Rani. I can feel the air on my stomach, though..." Inglis replied.

The dance-inspired costume showed some of her midriff, and her belly button was peeking out. She wasn't used to clothing like this. She felt a little out of place, a little embarrassed. However, she did like the fluttering bands of fabric and the shimmering embellishments. The outfit was pretty.

"It's fine! Don't be embarrassed. You've got a cute belly button. Look in the mirror and see!"

"Oh!" Inglis exclaimed. Then she paused, taking in her reflection. "I suppose I do look quite nice."

The costume made her look more mature. It drew out her glamor. Inglis was already a stunning beauty, and to wear an outfit like this—she was absolutely fabulous, if she did say so herself. She enjoyed staring at herself in the mirror

after a bath, but particular outfits brought out a certain appeal.

“Now turn around. Spin, spin! Gimme a smile!” Rafinha cheered.

Inglis smiled and let out a giggle.

“Yep! You’re, like, the perfect dress-up doll. You look so good in anything.”

“But I’m not a doll. I’m a person.”

“Right, right. So you only mind being a ‘doll’, not the dress-up? Then how about *this*?” Rafinha said before poking Inglis’s exposed belly button.

“Eeek! Stop it, Rani!” Inglis contemplated returning the favor.

“Heh heh. Go ahead and try, but my belly button is safe,” Rafinha teased. She was also wearing a dance-inspired costume, but hers was more reserved, less flashy than Inglis’s.

“No fair...” Inglis pouted.

“It’s fine. I’m here to be the perfect complement to you.”

Rafinha’s character was a backup dancer for Maribelle. Count Weismar had explained that a group of beautiful people dancing behind Maribelle would make the lead stand out even more, especially because Inglis was gorgeous even among the attractive cast.

“That’s not true. You look adorable! I wish I could be in the audience to watch you.” For Inglis, it would have been like watching her dear granddaughter perform under the spotlight. She would have liked nothing more than to applaud Rafinha while watching, but her own presence was required on stage.

“What are you talking about, Chris? You’re the star here. You’re the one dancing in front.”

“Don’t be too far behind me. I don’t mind if you’re lined up by my side.” That way, Inglis could watch Rafinha while performing.

“Okay. Anyway, it’s time to do your hair! Sit down, sit down!”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Hmm. There are so many styles we could do! I can barely decide!” Rafinha squealed.

As a full-fledged theater company, the Weismar Troupe had plenty of costume jewelry; Inglis and Rafinha were permitted to use them as they wished. For Rafinha, who made a hobby of dressing Inglis up, it was like being offered a treasure horde. “Hmm, what should we do? A big ribbon that’s easy for the audience to see? A long side braid that sways with your movements?”

“Whatever you think is best.”

“Okay! ♪”

A few minutes passed as Rafinha came to a decision and styled Inglis’s hair.

“All right, I’m done! How does it look? Did I get it right?”

“Yeah. It’s great. Really cute.”

Leone poked her head in suddenly. “Inglis, Rafinha, are you ready yet?”

Liselotte followed. Both she and Leone were wearing the same outfit as Rafinha. “It took the rest of us some time to get prepared, but we’ve finished.”

“Looking good, you two. Nice and cute,” Inglis said.

“Thanks, but we don’t measure up to you, Inglis,” Leone insisted.

“You’re like something out of a painting. Even though we’re both women, I can’t help but admire you,” Liselotte said.

Inglis chuckled. “Thanks.”

“So, what took you so long?” Rafinha asked.

“Leone’s costume was a tad tight up here—” Liselotte motioned at her chest. “We had to tailor it.”

Leone was, if anything, even more well-endowed than Inglis. Even now, the fabric around Leone was stretched taut.

“Life would be easier if I could lose a little bit of weight there too...” Leone complained.

Rafinha glared, the envy clear on her face. “Must be a nice worry to have. Rin, I’m jealous! Give her a good squirming!”

Perched on Rafinha’s head, Rin leaped at Leone.

“Ah...! Stop it, Rin!” Leone braced herself, but before Rin could burrow under her clothes, a hand reached out and tightly grabbed Rin, which was no small feat considering how quick the small magicite beast was.

“I can do that,” Yua said as her other hand grabbed Leone’s chest. “Mmm, big.” Her voice was as expressionless as ever, though.

Yua was wearing a knight costume with a breastplate for the play. Before the script changes, two leads would have been competing for Maribelle, played by Inglis. Now Maribelle and Euthylis, a lady knight played by Yua, would be competing for Malik, the prince of a minor country. In the final version, Inglis and Yua would have a real bout on stage without a scripted outcome, and the winner would appear in the kiss scene.

“Eeek?! Yua?!” Leone jumped back in surprise.

“You’ve got plenty. I wish you’d share...”

“Umm...”

“Right? I know how you feel,” Rafinha sympathized. “Because we’re the have-nots!”

“Looks that way.” The less-endowed shared a firm handshake. “I feel like I’m going to be judged as inferior playing alongside Booglis.”

“Could you please stop calling me that?!” Inglis protested.

“Would you prefer Inbies?” Yua asked.

“Not that either! Anyway, I don’t think you’ll come off as inferior.”

“Liar.”

“Yeah, you tell them, Yua! Chris and Leone can’t understand the feelings of the have-nots!” Rafinha agreed.

Inglis and Leone had no response to that.

Well, Rafinha’s right. Mine definitely grew, so I don’t know how it feels for them.

“Ah, Yua. If you’re worried about that, why not grow some?” Inglis suggested.

“Huh?” Yua had no idea what she meant by that.

“I mean, if you pad them with something, it will give the illusion of you having larger breasts. That way, on stage, we’ll look about the same.”

“Oh, really?”

Now she had Yua’s attention. “Maybe give it a try?”

“Okay. Like this?” Yua plunged Rin, who she’d been tightly holding on to the whole time, down her neckline.

Squeak! Squeak, squeak!

“Rin...?!” Inglis gasped.

“She’s talking?!” Rafinha exclaimed.

That was the first time they’d heard a peep out of Rin. She was desperate to escape Yua’s hand and scurried away.

“Hmm. She ran away,” Yua muttered.

Rin clung to Rafinha, trembling. At least Yua didn’t seem to take it personally. For whatever reason, Rin was terrified of Yua. That was unusual; she usually avoided men but stayed near girls.

“What’s wrong, Rin? Chris, could you keep an eye on her?”

“No problem, Rani.”

“Now, Yua, could you sit over there?”

“Kay.”

“By the way, Yua, did you come here for something in particular?” While Inglis and the others were being fitted for their costumes, Yua was supposed to have been rehearsing with Count Weismar.

“Mm... I was supposed to come get you, Booglis. We’re choosing now.”

“Choosing what?”

“The cute guy that’s our prize.”

Meaning, the casting of Prince Malik, who Maribelle and Euthylis would

compete for.



In Yua's mind, they were finding the best catch to play Prince Malik. Inglis didn't particularly care who was chosen. She was fine with whoever Yua preferred. However, Count Weismar—and especially Rafinha and Leone—were curious what Inglis's tastes were, so she decided to play along.

Ten candidates had been introduced so far and had shown off their singing, dancing, and other talents. Most were members of the Weismar Troupe. There were others who Count Weismar had selected in the same manner that he had Silva, but Inglis wasn't familiar with them.

"Was that the last one?" Yua asked Count Weismar as she made notes on a sheet of paper: #10: N.

A quick peek at her notes suggested that he wasn't what she was looking for. Marked with a Y were the second, sixth, and eighth candidates. Yua seemed to prefer boys with delicate features who were a bit androgynous or cute. If that was the case, Silva would definitely be out of the running. He was slender and good looking, but with a sharp, mature presentation.

"There's one more left. You may come in now!" Count Weismar called out to the candidate.

"I look forward to working with you! I'd love to perform alongside her!"

It was Reddas.

What's the captain of the Royal Guard doing here? He must have begged Count Weismar to include him, Inglis thought.

"My talents are swordsmanship and combat leadership! I'm proud of my ability to sing marches at the top of my lungs! Like this!" He took a deep breath.

"Nope. Failed," Yua remarked.

"Yes, I agree," Inglis said after an awkward pause.

"What?! Why?!" Reddas protested.

"Because you're not cute."

“Agreed.”

Thankfully for Inglis, Yua was just as quick to dismiss him. Reddas was even further removed from her tastes than his younger brother, Silva, was. Reddas had a sturdy build and a rugged air about him, even though his behavior here didn't really reflect the “rugged” part at all.

“Ugh... Very well! I shall cheer you on from the shadows!”

Exit Reddas, slumping with dejection.

“Well, that's all of them. What do you two think? Is there anyone you both agree on?” Count Weismar asked.

“Hmm. I'm not quite sure... What do you think?” Yua said.

“I agree with Yua. Numbers two, six, and eight, right?” Inglis replied.

“None of them really stood out above the others, though.”

Well, that doesn't really help, Inglis thought.

Sitting behind them, Rafinha and the others joined in on the discussion.

“Hey, Leone, who did you like?”

“Huh? M-Me? Hmm, maybe the first or fifth guy...”

“Ahh, I see. Yeah, I thought they'd be your type.”

They were the serious, calm, stern ones—men like Silva or Prince Wayne. Really, they were men decidedly *not* like Leon. Considering Leone's background, that made a lot of sense.

“How about you, Rafinha?” Leone asked.

“I liked three, seven, and ten...”

“Ah, that's not surprising. They reminded me of Rafael.”

“Or like Ambassador Theodore, I suppose?” Rafinha giggled.

What's with that smile?! I can't let this go! Inglis thought. “C'mon, Rani! Remember when you were little? You said you would marry Rafael when you grew up. That was sweet!”

Rafinha was much better about boys when she was young. No vermin needed.

She's still too young for romance.

"Ugh, why do you keep saying that? People are gonna think I'm a weirdo!" Rafinha complained.

"Aha ha... How about you, Liselotte? Who did you like?" Leone asked.

"For me, it was the fourth and the ninth."

"What?!" Liselotte's unexpected taste produced gasps of awe.

"Those beefy guys?" Rafinha asked.

"I didn't know you liked them that sweaty," Leone agreed.

"Yes. I prefer men with prominent muscles," Liselotte answered.

"Wait, like, even including Reddas?" Rafinha asked.

"I wouldn't mind him. Wasn't he wonderful before?"

The other girls fell silent.

Well, everyone has their own opinion, Inglis thought.

"Hmm..." As Yua listened, she scribbled quickly: *Spike has bad taste in men.*

What was the point of writing that? Inglis thought. "Er, anyway, Yua. Have you decided on someone?"

"Hmm. Like I said, there's not really anything that makes any of them stand out..."

"Then, why don't we have another audition tomorrow with the three you mentioned?" Count Weismar suggested.

Yua nodded. "Yeah. Sure."

"Very well, very well. Then, for the rest of the day, let us continue with rehearsals—"

A moment later, another boy arrived.

"Heeey! I'm here with that Flygear you wanted! Where do you want me to park it?" Lahti said. He was Inglis's classmate, a fellow squire-in-training.

"Oh my! Well done, well done! Now that the auditions are over, I'd like you

two to try out the choreography for the Flygear fight. Do you mind?" Count Weismar requested.

"That's a fine idea. I'd never pass up a fight," Inglis replied.

"I'd rather save the real fight for last. It'll wear me out," Yua said.

"This is a scripted scene, so it shouldn't wear you out too much," the count said. "The only thing that doesn't have a fixed conclusion is the final battle on stage."

That was a little disappointing for Inglis, but she could always just consider it a warm-up.

"Fine, then." Yua nimbly leaped into the air, springing off the backdrop into the Flygear that Lahti was piloting near the ceiling. To be precise, her figure suddenly disappeared before reappearing next to Lahti.

"What?! When did you—?! It's like you were totally gone for a second!" Lahti gasped.

"Mm. Thanks for bringing it. You can get out now."

"But it's high up here! I can't just jump down from this high!"

"Huh? Are you frail?" Yua asked, confused.

"Listen, I'm just a squire-in-training! I don't have an Artifact or anything!"

"Huh? So am I."

Lahti had no reply to that.

"No, that's fine. I think I'll add pilots for the show, and a bit where you leap into each other's Flygears! Like this, hop-hop!" Count Weismar made an exaggerated motion. "So, you there! Would you be Yua's pilot?"

"Sure thing! Leave it to me!" Lahti was one of the most talented Flygear pilots at the knights' academy. He was the right choice.

"Well... Then, Inglis, you can ride this one. I can't keep up with Lahti as a pilot, though," Pullum offered. Like Lahti, she was a classmate, but she was training to be a knight. She had arrived with a Flygear alongside Lahti.

It was mostly the first-and second-years who would help the Weismar Troupe,

while Silva and the other third-years focused on rebuilding the academy.

“It’s okay, Pullum! Chris will ride this one!” Rafinha’s voice echoed down from overhead. She had, without being noticed, gotten aboard the *Star Princess*.

She’s fast! Inglis thought. She stared at the ostentatious Flygear. “Are we really going to use that?” *A normal one would be better. Definitely.*

“Yes, we are! Definitely!”

“Oho! Of course! I think it’s cute and girly!” Count Weismar announced.

“But— Count Weismar, I think it will stand out more than Yua’s Flygear,” Inglis argued.

“It’s okay. That won’t be a problem,” Yua said.

“Why’s that, Yua?” Inglis asked.

“We can paint this one and make it cute too.”

“Agreed! We’ll help out! Right, Pullum?” Rafinha excitedly announced.

“Yes! It’ll be nice to paint another one!” Pullum agreed. She and Rafinha were the duo responsible for the *Star Princess*’s custom look, and now their eyes were gleaming at the thought of doing another.

“The principal might get mad...” Inglis said, still trying to push against using the flashy Flygear. Then she leaped high, somersaulting into the *Star Princess*. Her dancer’s costume, along with the hairstyle and ribbon Rafinha had chosen for her, fluttered beautifully as she did.

“Oh my! Inglis, you’re like a work of art. The way you just moved already has me in awe.” Count Weismar nodded in satisfaction.

“Thank you.” As eccentric as he looked, there was no ill intent in his words or actions. She could take him at face value.

“Indeed! Inglis, you’re so cute! You’re perfect for the *Star Princess*!”

“Sure is! I know Chris best, and I designed it, so it only makes sense!” Rafinha boasted.

“Well, I think there are still some things we don’t understand about each other...” Inglis responded. *Especially in regard to the Star Princess’s design.*

“Very well, then! Now can you circle over the audience as if you’re trying to gain the advantage in a dogfight?” Count Weismar requested.

“Sure. Ready? You all set, Yua?” Inglis asked.

“Yeah. Leave this to me.”

“Very well, then! One, two...!”

The two Flygears sprang into motion at once, drawing a circular arc as they faced off at a steady distance.

“This is too simple, not impressive at all. Let’s make it fancier! Follow me!” Lahti said.

The motions of the Flygear he piloted became more complex. Even in a limited space, it made large vertical loops, and drew a complex, wavelike trajectory. The fact that it was indoors made it even more impressive.

“Guh... Not bad! The *Star Princess* is still better on the whole, though...!” Rafinha grumbled. She was astonished by Lahti’s amazing piloting skills.

The scene only had acrobatics. It was missing something—it needed to have more of an impact by mixing in hand-to-hand combat.

“Yua! Let’s jump out of our Flygears and try some aerial combat!” Inglis prompted.

“Okay... Go!” Yua danced through the air as if she was hopping down from a chair or a bed. She made the motions look so natural.

“Haaah!” Inglis followed her, and they drew close in the air. “Yua, give me a punch! It’s fine if it’s just acting!”

“Kay.”

Bam! Baaam! Boooom!

Their fists met, and the sound of the blows echoed from the walls and ceiling.

“Now let’s swap Flygears with the recoil from our kicks!” Inglis said.

“Mm.”

Clang!

Inglis and Yua traded kicks with another audible clash. Using the momentum from their attacks, they safely landed on each other's Flygears.

"Oh *my*! So intense! This is amazing!" Count Weismar praised.

Both Count Weismar and the other members of his troupe were satisfied. A wave of applause suddenly rang out.

"They truly are a sight to behold! This will be a great show!"

"We could never have pulled that off ourselves! Thank goodness for the knights' academy!"

Lahti chuckled. "Ha ha ha... Man, that blew me away."

"C'mon, Lahti, you're a fantastic pilot yourself," Inglis said. Then she turned her eyes to the *Star Princess*, which Yua was now using—only to see a burst of magical light coalesce around the small gunport at its prow. Inglis gasped. "Wh—?!"

Yua was gripping the controls, and that's where the strange light was coming from.

"Huh?! What's going on?! Yua, are you doing that?!"

"No! I dunno what it is!"

"Lahti, get out of there!"

Fwoosh!

The magical light from the *Star Princess* flashed toward Lahti.

"Aaagh!" Lahti barely managed to steer out of the way in time. He and Inglis were safe—but they were practicing for a show. They could afford to keep the action going.

"Haaah!" Inglis jumped toward a nearby wall and kicked off of it. Her

momentum propelled her into the light's trajectory, where she caught the magical blast in the palm of her hand.

Fzzzt!

A chorus of astonished voices yelled, "Wha—?! Did she just—?!"

"Wait! Chris, are you okay?! There's smoke coming from your hand!" Rafinha exclaimed. Even she hadn't predicted Inglis would do that.

"Not to worry. It was a little warm, that's all," Inglis replied.

"Are you trying to burn yourself?! You'd already avoided the blast!"

"It's better to take an attack head-on than to avoid it."

Even assuming that magical light had been unintentional, it definitely had something to do with Yua. Inglis was intrigued.

"That makes *no* sense," Rafinha shot back.

"Think of it this way: we'd be in trouble if that attack broke the wall, right?"

Rafinha paused. She had to agree with that. "Okay, I guess you have a point."

"Sorry. It wasn't on purpose..." Yua shook her head in confusion.

"I know," Inglis said. "The *Star Princess* must have gone haywire."

That Flygear unit had belonged to the Highlanders before Inglis and Rafinha captured it and set it up purely for their own use. When Inglis and Lahti had investigated it further, they came across a feature they'd never seen on the academy's Flygears: a weapon that amplified magic and fired it from the prow. Unlike with Artifacts, this tool did not automatically control the flow of mana, which meant a person needed to be able to use magic—or something very close to it—to fire it. It was a weapon for Highlanders alone.

Somehow, Yua was an exception.

After all, Inglis had seen her chop a magicite beast in half with her bare hands. She wondered whether it was possible to embody magical power by shrouding oneself in it, similar to how she used Aether Shell. However, in Yua's case, it

certainly wasn't normal mana. Inglis had struggled to detect it, but nonetheless it was quite powerful. The blast had been more powerful than she had expected at first glance; her palm was still tingling.

From Yua's demeanor, it was obvious she hadn't fired the weapon deliberately. If she used some kind of magical enhancement, then such a power could have involuntarily flowed into the cannon.

"This one's dangerous. I probably shouldn't ride it." Yua hopped down from the *Star Princess* with a light touch, despite the aircraft hovering up by the ceiling, but even though she came from near-ceiling height, she landed lightly.

"That's right! A normal Flygear really would be better," Inglis agreed emphatically. *That way I won't have to show myself in public aboard something that tooth-rottingly saccharine.*

"Nope! No matter which one you use, we're painting it!" Rafinha insisted.

Talking louder doesn't necessarily mean you're right... Inglis thought.

Then the hull of the *Star Princess* suddenly lurched.

"Huh?! No way! It froze up?!" Pullum gasped.

The sudden activation of its weapons system may have been too much for the *Star Princess*. It began to fall.

Yua was underneath it and preoccupied. "Oh no, it slipped." She was referring to, of all things, the padded inserts Rafinha had slipped into her clothes.

"Ah, look out!"

Inglis watched as a boy around their age dashed toward Yua to push her out of the way.

He looks like a member of Weismar's troupe. He's a brave kid, but—

Thud!

Yua didn't flinch as he smashed into her. Instead, he simply ended up embracing her.

“H-Huh?! Why are you stuck in place?!”

“Mm?” Yua tilted her head in confusion as the boy’s eyes opened wide in shock.

“Yua, it’s dangerous! Move!” Rafinha cried out.

“Ah?”

Smack!

Yua absentmindedly caught the falling *Star Princess* in one hand. She had a lot of strength for someone with such a small and slender form.

But that’s Yua for you. Inglis had moved, ready to catch it, but that hadn’t been necessary.

“Th-Thanks, Yua. That was helpful! If it had crashed, that would’ve been awful!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“Yeah. Guess I’ve paid you back for the pads.”

“Rani, are you okay?” Inglis asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“So... What are you doing?” Yua turned to face the boy whose arms were still wrapped around her waist.

“Oh, ha ha... I was passing by and saw something falling, so I tried to help out... Aha ha ha...” He hadn’t expected such a slim girl would remain unflinching.

Then Lahti spoke up. “Huh...? H-Hey! Ian?! Is that you, Ian?!”

“Ah, it really is Ian! It’s been so long!” Pullum exclaimed. He appeared to be an acquaintance of theirs.



“Oh...?! Ah... Prince—?!”

“Wh—?! Hey!” Lahti stammered.

“Prince?!” Latching on to the word, everyone stared at Ian, waiting for him to say more.

“Ah, no, never mind! Anyway, it’s been so long, you two!” Ian continued.

Rafinha turned to Inglis. “He just said something about a prince, didn’t he, Chris?”

“He did, yeah.”

“Wha—?! It was nothing! Sorry! Really, it was nothing!” Ian insisted.

“Wait, did you mean you want to play the prince?” Yua asked Ian.

“Ah, right, that’s it! I joined the troupe to work on the set, but I’d like to try standing on stage as well!”

“Sure, that works. You’re hired.” Yua responded without missing a bit. She clapped a hand on Ian’s shoulder. Her blank expression held the hint of a sparkle.

Taking a closer look at Ian, Inglis noticed that he had an exceptionally pretty, almost girlish face. *This boy is exactly her type*, she thought.

“Old man, I want him to play the prince,” Yua announced.

Count Weismar nodded casually at Yua’s request. “My, my! In that case, the role of Prince Malik is yours, Ian!”

Ian rambled off in surprise. “What?! Getting the lead is that easy?! I’m still just an amateur at performing, though. I’m a newbie compared to the others who’ve been with the troupe longer—”

“It’s a request from a leading lady,” Count Weismar said. “You’ll be fine. After all, this play’s really riding on Inglis and Yua, and they’re students from the knights’ academy—they aren’t actors. This will be a special, unique performance. Your inexperience won’t cause any further issues. Inglis, do you find that amenable?”

“I don’t mind.” The important part was that Yua picked him. That worked for

Inglis.

“B-But—!”

“Ian, you have potential as an actor. With experience, you’ll blossom into a star. Yua must also have picked up on that and suggested you,” the count said. “Right, Yua?”

“Huh? I’m not really sure what you mean, but I think his face is cute.”

Well, it’s not like we should have expected Yua to have opinions on acting ability, Inglis thought.

“Meaning, you’re fabulous! Take on the challenge with confidence, Ian!” the count continued.

“O...kay...”

“It’ll be fine. Give it a try,” Lahti encouraged. “I have no clue why you’re in a theater troupe, but it’s always good to pick up new skills, and it’s nice to have people relying on you.”

“Pr— Uh, Lahti... Understood. I’ll do it!”

“Then it’s decided! Let’s get started with rehearsals! First, a reading of the script!” Count Weismar declared.

The rehearsal began in earnest. Once the day came to an end, the group talked among themselves.

“Anyway, what’re you doing here, Ian?” Lahti asked. He turned to his classmates and added, “Ah, he’s a friend of mine and Pullum’s from back home.”

“So he’s from Alcard?” Inglis confirmed.

Lahti and Pullum were exchange students from Alcard, a country to the north that bordered Karelia. If Ian was a friend of theirs from back home, he was probably originally from there too.

“Yeah. Unlike us, he’s a well-behaved noble,” Lahti said. “So what are you doing with a theatrical troupe?”

“Leave me out of this, please. I think I’m quite well behaved,” Pullum

interjected.

“Sheesh, find a better time to defend yourself. You’re interrupting.”

“And just who am I supposed to have good manners for?”

“Like I’m supposed to know! I’m trying to talk to Ian!”

Ian chuckled. “You two seem to be getting along as well as ever.”

“Whatever. Anyway, what happened?” Lahti asked.

“Honestly... I didn’t have anywhere else to go...” Ian looked down and shivered as he spoke. Lahti’s and Pullum’s faces went pale.

“Huh?! What happened?!”

“Is everyone okay, Ian?!”

“It was magicite beasts! A gigantic magicite beast destroyed my family’s mansion, our lands, even my family and the townspeople. And not just that—it did a lot of damage to the capital! Thankfully, the royal family is safe, but...”

“What?! There have been more magicite beasts lately, but—” Lahti started.

“I can’t believe such a strong magicite beast appeared!” Pullum gasped.

“Chris, could that be...?” Rafinha trailed off.

“Yeah. I wonder if it’s a Prismer.”

Alcard was a snowy land, its barren soil and harsh landscape made up for by a comparatively low presence of the Prism Flow. While the threat of magicite beasts was, of course, not completely absent, the damage from them was also comparatively low, which meant they didn’t have a strong dependence on Highland. Alcard didn’t even have a hial menace. Highland also did not intervene in their affairs, perhaps uninterested in barren taiga.

Of the surrounding area, the richest farmlands were clearly in Inglis’s homeland of Karelia. That was why the two great factions of Highland placed such importance in affairs there and vied for influence in them.

“I don’t know for sure whether it was one of the legendary Prismers, but I saw it shining like a rainbow...” Ian said.

“Ugh... And without a hial menace, Alcard can’t protect itself. Something like a Prismer won’t leave a trace of anything standing!” Lahti bemoaned.

“But...at least you’re okay, Ian... That alone means a lot...” Pullum, tears in her eyes, tightly gripped his hand.

“Yeah. I’m glad you’re okay,” Lahti agreed.

“Thanks, Lahti. Thanks, Pullum... Anyway, when I was lost, Count Weismar found me. I’ve always loved art, so being exposed to the troupe has been a good distraction.”

“I... I’m sorry... I just opened my mouth without having any idea of what had happened...” Lahti said, distraught.

“No, don’t worry about it. Seeing you again and having you give me that little push forward has cheered me up.”

Rafinha bit her lip as she watched them. Too quiet for Lahti and the others to hear, she whispered to Inglis. “I feel so bad we couldn’t be there for them...”

“You’re a kind person, Rani. But there’s nothing we could have done.”

It had already happened in a faraway country.

At this moment, someone out there’s probably losing their life to a magicite beast. That’s what it means to live on the surface, to live under the Prism Flow. To be uncomfortable with that happening even in a foreign land, to share their pain... Rafinha’s heart is admirable. She’s noble. Compassionate. Strong. She empathizes with those who have no bearing on her own life. It would be easy to call such feelings childish innocence, but in the end, it’s the people who keep that innocence alive within themselves who can move others’ hearts. Those people can change the world.

Inglis knew this from experience. That’s why, from the perspective of a guardian, she would continue to keep watch over Rafinha.

But I’m afraid she’ll say something like, “I’m going to stop the Prism Flow so everyone can live in peace!” The Prism Flow is convenient—what would I do without the power of nature creating powerful foes? If Rafinha wanted that, of course I’d help. I only wonder if it would be possible to leave just enough for me

while making sure they didn't bother anyone else.

"There, there." Yua pitter-pattered toward Ian and patted him on the head.

"Er...? Yua? What are—"

"I'm soothing you. Is it working?"

"Yua, he's not a little kid..." Lahti seemed dumbfounded.

"Then how about we cheer you up by moving the kiss ahead of schedule?" Yua offered.

"Huuuh?! Wh-What are you saying, Yua?! That's so forward!" Ian's face turned bright red. He was rather shy.

That might not be much consolation, but it would at least probably be a distraction for him, Inglis thought.

"Why wait on it if we're gonna kiss eventually? There's one at the end of the play."

"Whaaat?! Agh! There really is! Am... Am I—" Ian shrieked as he flipped to the end of the script. Their read-through hadn't reached the end, and he hadn't checked ahead yet.

"See? Why wait?"

"No!" Inglis sharply warned Yua.

"Mm?"

"That's something for on stage—not now!"

If Yua was allowed to satisfy herself here and now, there was the danger that she might say she didn't want to fight or not give it her all during the show. Everything was working out so well—it would be a tragedy for things to fall apart now. Inglis had to nip this in the bud.

"Anyway, try not to play around with him too much. He's in a rough place," Yua said, oddly earnest.

"That's right." Lahti placed a hand on Inglis's shoulder.

"Huh?! Is it just me, or...?" Inglis trailed off, confused.

“I was being serious,” Yua insisted.

“Okay, but I was too.”

“Oh, whatever! Anyway, please. He’s a dear friend of mine.”

“Lahti, you don’t have to be so mad.” Ian smiled, slightly bemused.

“Ian?”

“I need to find a new way of life, and live it... If I don’t, my family and those close to us won’t be able to rest. You all seem enthusiastic. If I can spend some time with you, I think I’ll find some kind of purpose. So don’t worry about it. Let’s get along.”

“It’s our pleasure! Anyway, brightening things up is my specialty!” Rafinha smiled. The look on her face said that she wanted to support him as he tried to be positive. There was no reason to stop her as long as he didn’t find it to be a bother. “I’m a backup dancer for Chris, but if she does anything reckless, I’ll scold her. If she causes trouble, don’t hesitate to tell me!”

“Uhhh... Got it. Thank you,” Ian replied.

Yua faced Inglis and pointed at Rafinha. “Guardian?”

“N-No! I’m the one who watches over Rani!” Inglis insisted.

“Really? Doesn’t seem like it.”

“You’re just imagining things. I’m Rani’s future squire, so I watch over her at all times, from her daily life to her actions on the battlefield.”

“Someone as beautiful and ladylike as Inglis doesn’t look like she’s going to do anything reckless, though,” Ian said.

“Oh, she definitely would!” The response came in unison from everyone present.

“Huh?! Really?” Ian asked.

Inglis didn’t bother defending herself. *Well, there is a part of me that likes to have a good time*, Inglis thought. *But I wouldn’t call my behavior “reckless,” exactly.*

“You didn’t see what happened earlier... Anyway, you’ll find out sooner or

later,” Lahti said. “If this is what you want to do, I’m behind you all the way.”

“It is. Thanks, Lahti.” Ian smiled softly.

Chapter IV: Inglis, Age 15—Dual Starlets (4)

Several days later, Ian's perception of Inglis suddenly changed.

Crrrashhh! Bam, bam, bam! Boooooom!

Inglis and Yua leaped between Flygears over the audience seating, exchanging blows as they practiced the battle scene of the finale.

Inglis's character, Maribelle, was a popular dancer but had been born into a famous family of knights. She and Prince Malik were childhood friends who were expected to marry, but when she was ten years old, her family fell to ruin, and the engagement was called off. She traveled the land for seven years until meeting Prince Malik in a foreign land, where he had been appointed feudal lord.

In the current scene, Maribelle, trained as a knight and with a personality befitting one, was on her way to save Prince Malik, whose life was in danger. The tide of battle had turned against him. Yua was playing the other protagonist and Maribelle's romantic rival, Euthylis. She was a lady knight who had entered Prince Malik's service after his engagement to Maribelle was called off.

Maribelle, wanting to rescue Malik herself, faces off against Euthylis, who tries to stop her. In a show of strength, Maribelle battles Euthylis. Later, having learned to respect each other's skill, the two come to an understanding that the loser will promise to step back from the rescue. Afterward, the most exciting part unfolds: a serious, unscripted battle.

The speedy movement of both Inglis and Yua was dazzling, magnificent, and uncannily forceful. The heavy sound of strikes echoing through the air made that clear at once.

"A-Amazing... Now I understand what Lahti meant," Ian murmured as he watched, dumbstruck. His eyes darted in all directions as he tried to follow the

pair.

“Now you get it. Try pointing out anything ladylike there,” Lahti said from next to him.

Lahti and Pullum would be appearing in the play as Flygear pilots. Right now, Pullum was the one practicing her piloting skills.

“Ha ha, indeed... I guess every rose has its thorns.”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

“Anyway, it looks like neither of them have Runes or Artifacts. They’re incredible.”

“Right? Those two can even take out magicite beasts.”

“What?! Without an Artifact?!”

“Yeah. I’ve seen it myself.”

“H-How?”

“No clue! But it’s a big world—maybe even big enough for people like them.”

“We don’t have many Artifacts in Alcard...”

“Yeah.”

To some, the king of Alcard was neglecting the protection of his people, but the reality was that Alcard had a uniquely difficult situation. The country’s poor harvests due to its inhospitable climate made it a challenge to put together enough goods and crops to afford numerous Artifacts or a hial menace. Highlanders didn’t care that some countries had harder circumstances. Even if they did exchange their crops for Artifacts and a hial menace, letting the people starve and the country collapse in the process would be putting the cart before the horse.

“If only there had been people like them in Alcard...” Ian trailed off before shaking his head. “No, what’s done is done. I need to stop letting my mind wander, and work as hard at this play as I can... I guess.”

“Yeah...”

Meanwhile, Count Weismar erupted in high-pitched praise for Inglis and Yua.

“Oh my! Oh *my*! You’re even more wonderful than before! My head was spinning so hard to follow you that I have a cramp in the back of my neck! Ouch! Ah, such a pleasant pain! Then, let’s move to Prince Malik’s scene... Ian, you’re on stage,” Count Weismar prompted.

“Right!”

As Ian advanced, Inglis and Yua traded places with him, retreating to the wings.

“Good work, Yua. That must have taken a lot out of you. Here, have some water.” Inglis filled a glass from the pitcher set aside for breaks and passed it to Yua.

“Thanks. I’m not really tired, though, you know.”

“Ah! So you’re feeling enthusiastic?” That was unexpected for Yua. It usually didn’t take her long to complain about being worn out, or bored, or tired.

“I’ve been feeling good lately.”

“That’s good to hear. I was worried that you might have been affected by some kind of residual effect from before.” In their fight against the Prismers on the school grounds, it had absorbed Yua into its body. Inglis had hoped Yua was completely fine afterward, so she was pleased with how Yua was acting.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“By the way, Yua, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you.”

“What?”

“When we fought seriously, you used some kind of fearsome technique to mask what you were doing so that I couldn’t perceive it, right? What kind of technique was that? If you don’t mind telling me.”

Being able to hide all traces of mana was an amazing feat. It was something Inglis currently couldn’t achieve herself. She wanted to learn everything she could about it. She was sure it would come in handy.

“I...wasn’t really hiding anything,” Yua answered.

“Huh? But you were obviously...” *Maybe you don’t want to answer, but I’m*

going to keep pressing on this one, Inglis thought.

“I just blended in,” Yua said.

Apparently, it wasn’t that Yua didn’t want to answer, but that her perception was different.

“Huh? You blended in?”

“With the world.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“My dad told me to return to the world.”

Inglis paused, giving Yua’s words some weight. “I see. So you go with the flow of the world—of nature.”

The world—nature—was filled with various flows of power: light which illuminated one’s path, wind which brushed one’s cheek, the rain which nurtured the earth, flame which gave birth to civilization. The flow of mana existed within all those natural phenomena. Probed more deeply, it revealed itself as the flow of aether.

Even as someone who could sense both mana and aether, Inglis found it difficult to clearly recognize and grasp these natural flows. After all, for those who lived in this world, it was truly *natural*. It was a constant cosmic backdrop of life.

Artificial flows, like the ones an individual gathered around themselves or the twisting of nature by the floating circle in the town of Nova, were easy to understand, but Yua had mastered the art of matching her power to the natural flows around her. Inglis’s own habit of treating them as strictly natural and not to be worried about had dulled her response to Yua’s movements. Even she had found Yua difficult to read, except by the radical measure of ignoring her sense of sight to focus solely on the flow of mana.

“Yeah. I guess,” Yua said.

“That’s a wonderful technique! What kind of person is your father? I’d love to get the same kind of training from him as you did!”

If he can train me in the same way, I’m sure it will improve my ability to

manipulate aether as well, Inglis reasoned to herself. The black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front had a final technique that was able to manipulate the wavelength of his own aether and change its nature to repel mine, which let him deflect my attacks, protecting himself. With what I've learned so far, I can't break through that defense. But a more flexible approach like Yua's may be the key to doing so. I'd love to learn it!

"What kind of person is he?" Yua repeated lazily.

"Yes. I'd love to meet him someday!" Inglis said.

"Hmm... I don't remember what he looks like," Yua said, much to Inglis's shock.

"Huhhh?!" She'd forgotten such a thing? Inglis had no words for that.

Maybe they don't have a good relationship, maybe he's passed away, maybe it's something like that. But even if she is avoiding the subject, why would she say that?

It was too astonishing. Well, maybe it wasn't that surprising for Yua to say such a thing.

"Huh? Is that weird?" Yua asked.

"Err... Yeah. Very."

"Really? I guess maybe he wasn't my dad?"

"How am I supposed to answer— Anyway! Would it be difficult to meet him?"

"Probably."

Not that it's any of my business, but...

"All right, next is the scene with Prince Malik and Euthylis. Yua, over this way, please!" Count Weismar called.

"Okay." Yua ambled off to the center of the stage.

"Well, then..." Looks like it might be difficult to get that kind of training. If I can't do that, I'll just have to learn by watching her. I can't wait to fight her for real again. Showtime can't come soon enough, Inglis thought.

Also waiting in the wings, Lahti struck up a conversation. "Hey, Inglis. Yua sure

said something surprising, didn't she?"

"You were listening? When she said she couldn't remember what her father looked like."

"Yeah, I'm shocked."

"Hm..."

"You think she'll be able to remember the script?"

"Actually, she's doing a pretty good job of it."

As Yua rehearsed her scene with Prince Malik, she wasn't holding a copy of the script—Inglis figured she must have committed the lines to memory. Her performance was surprisingly solid. Inglis wasn't concerned about Yua's ability to play her role. Ian was also very good as Prince Malik—so good that Inglis was worried she'd be the one to drag the performance down.

"Anyway, Inglis, um..."

"Yes?"

"This is about Ian, but can you promise me not to tell Pullum or anyone else? Something about him seems strange."

"He seems reliable to me, but... Is there something you noticed?"

"Yeah. I grew up with him, so I think I know him pretty well. The person I know would have stayed behind and helped rebuild after his family's lands were destroyed and the capital was damaged... Joining a theatrical troupe alone and washing up here... I don't think there's anything wrong with that, but it just doesn't seem like him."

"Maybe something happened that he didn't tell us about," Inglis said, pausing. "I think it's better for us not to pry. It might make things even harder on him. We should wait until he's comfortable coming to us about it."

Lahti nodded. "Right. Got it."

I think it'll be better that way. I'm glad he thinks so too.

"Next, let's practice Maribelle's dance scene! Over here, Inglis! Rafinha, Leone, Liselotte, you too!"

“Okay.” As Inglis took her place at center stage, Leone and Liselotte, who had been watching, also joined in.

“Huh? Where’s Rani?” Inglis asked.

“I haven’t seen her in a little while. She said she had something important to take care of,” Leone answered.

“She left earlier and said she’d be right back. Did she say anything to you?” Liselotte added.

“Wait, is she—” As Inglis began to ask, Rafinha returned.

“Ahmm hacc!” Rafinha announced, her cheeks stuffed like a chipmunk’s. What she’d been up to was immediately obvious. “Phoo, mave ih ih faim! (Phew, made it in time!)”

“Rani... You snuck off for a snack...” Lunchtime was approaching, and the troupe was preparing. Rani had apparently been unable to wait any longer and snuck off to eat. *No fair. I’ve been trying to hold off despite being hungry.*

“Hee. Vow va vohf nihlfee. (Here. Now we’re both guilty.)”

Rafinha stuffed the cold-cut sandwich in her hand into Inglis’s mouth.

“Fhff. Wahmai vuhn oo vifoo? (Sheesh. What am I gonna do with you?)”

“Well, well! Growing children must eat well! Eat well, and give me a good performance!” Even with Inglis and Rafinha, Count Weismar was tolerant.

“Count Weismar sure is generous,” Leone whispered to Liselotte.

“You’re right. He doesn’t seem angry at all. He may be even more relaxed than the principal...” Liselotte replied.

Principal Miriela was definitely soft-spoken, gentle, and kind, but even she had her limits, which Inglis and Rafinha tested from time to time. Leone and Liselotte had expected the count to behave like the principal during their rehearsals.

“Well, I believe that each person has their own way of growing,” Count Weismar whispered to Leone and Liselotte as if he’d heard them. “Some grow by being scolded. Some grow by being praised. There are many types—but

those two grow by being fed. If their stomachs are full, they'll show me something wonderful. So, it's worth feeding them."

"They sound like animals," Leone replied.

"Indeed... Like lions in the zoo," Liselotte continued.

"Yeah."

"I know I'm not supposed to laugh about this, but..."

Leone and Liselotte both giggled.

"Mm... There we go!" Inglis said as they stopped eating.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! Let's start!" Rafinha agreed.

"I see, I see! Very well, then, dance beautifully!"

Count Weismar brought the group into formation, with Inglis in front and the other three in a line behind. Then, as he clapped out a beat, they performed the choreography they'd been taught, changing their positions as they went. It hadn't been long since they had begun practicing, but their choreography was flawless.

"Ah, you're wonderful! Like goddesses descended from heaven! That's perfect!" Count Weismar was full of excitement as he cheered them on.

"Ha ha ha. Being praised like this doesn't feel bad," Leone whispered as they danced.

"Yeah," Inglis agreed.

"This is a little embarrassing, but it might be a good way to relax," Liselotte followed.

"Yes. Let's have some fun while we're here! We wouldn't normally get to do something like this," Rafinha said.

None of the four were particularly practiced dancers, but they made up for their lack of experience with their exceptional training from the knights' academy. In terms of physical ability, they all far surpassed the average person. It took barely any time at all before they could outstrip the Weismar Troupe's professional actors. From the tips of their fingers to the tips of their toes, their

movements were coordinated and supple. Their hair and outfits swayed as they moved, and you could even hear the sound of fabric rubbing against fabric. At the end of the routine, Inglis stepped forward alone, and after a few lightning-fast steps, she struck a pose as a drop of sweat rolled down her cheek and hit the floor. It was quite intense.

“That’s it! That was so good! I have nothing more to say about this scene!” the count pronounced, nodding in satisfaction.

“You all were so beautiful! I wonder if I could be like that...” Pullum pondered, her eyes gleaming.

“Don’t start thinking you should be up there! You’d just get in the way,” Lahti interjected.

“Hmph. So I’m not as cute as Inglis and the others?”

“That’s not what I meant. Just, different people have different talents.”

As the two bickered like usual, they suddenly heard applause from another direction.

“That was wonderful! You’re so beautiful, Lady Inglis!”

“Ah, Reddas...”

Reddas had, at some point, set himself up in the audience, and now he was clapping wildly while weeping tears of joy. He wasn’t alone either—several others from the Royal Guard accompanied him. They had rave reviews of the girls’ dance performance.

“That was so beautiful...”

“Yet so different from before... It swept me off my feet.”

“The other girls were cute too. That we got to see this was truly a blessing.”

Not that any of that was particularly important.

Among the applauding knights was one other person of note. “Mm. A wonderful performance. I quite enjoyed it. Perhaps this will help return a sense of normalcy to the people of the capital as well.”

“Ah...! His Majesty—” Inglis gasped. Even King Carlias was clapping with a

smile.

“Oh, he’s really here!” Rafinha added.

“Eh?! His Majesty was watching us?” Leone said.

“Oh my!” Liselotte said.

The four were stunned.

“Well, well. If it isn’t His Majesty! Thank you for your presence! Be sure to come see the show! We’ll present a masterpiece!” Count Weismar said.

King Carlias nodded. “Very well. I shall. I see I was right to grant you use of the Royal Theater.”

“Even this country’s king will be watching... This is really intense...” Ian’s face went pale, and he suddenly seemed very nervous.

At odds with everyone else, Yua asked Inglis, “Who’s the old guy?”

Inglis just stared at her.



It had been a while since Inglis and the others began practicing with Weismar’s troupe for their performance; the curtain would be raised soon. The troupe had provided Inglis and Rafinha with meals the whole time, for which the pair was extremely grateful. And now, the time had come.

“Today’s the day, Chris!”

“Yeah. It’s been such a wait, Rani!” Faint tears welled up in Inglis’s and Rafinha’s eyes.

“We’ve worked so hard!”

“Yeah. I’m so proud!”

They hugged each other tightly, thinking fondly on their days of perseverance. The school building of the knights’ academy was finally rebuilt. Many parts were not completely done, but the door to the cafeteria loomed in front of Inglis and Rafinha. Today, it reopened. Unable to stand still, they’d been camped out in front of it before the reopening.

Soon, so soon, the moment they'd been waiting for would finally arrive.

"Is it really something to cry about?" Leone asked, taken aback.

"Did the troupe not give you all the meals you wanted while the cafeteria was closed?" Liselotte asked, surprised by how emotional they were being.

"Yes, but we were eating off of a limited menu!" Rafinha insisted.

"And we've been holding back so there was food for the troupe too!" Inglis added.

"That was you holding back?" Leone and Liselotte gasped in unison.

The troupe's cooks had cradled their heads in their hands, watching Inglis and Rafinha eat, wondering whether the show would even turn a profit, but Count Weismar didn't seem to care so long as the performance was good.

The door to the cafeteria opened with a creak.

"Oh? Were you lining up? Sorry to keep you waiting! We're open again!" The familiar smile of the cafeteria worker welcomed them inside.

"Yay! We did it! The super-sized supreme blazin' hot pasta awaits me!" Rafinha exclaimed.

"Me too! I wonder how many servings I can eat?" Inglis said.

"Er... Don't you two have rehearsal after?" Leone reminded them.

"If you eat too much, you won't even be able to move," Liselotte scolded.

"You can't fight on an empty stomach!" Inglis and Rafinha replied in unison. They had nothing but food on the brain as usual.

"I knew you'd be here, Inglis, Rafinha!" Principal Miriela said, walking in.

"Ah, Principal—" they replied.

"This isn't the time to be in the cafeteria!" she said.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Inglis asked.

"We've still got plenty of time before rehearsal," Rafinha pointed out.

"That's not what I mean! You have some very important guests!"

“Err?” Inglis asked. What social engagement could be more important than their date with a plate of super-sized supreme blazin’ hot pasta? Hopefully not another summons to the castle, where they’d be asked to take on a bothersome job and then miss out on a feast. That was definitely not in her plans for the day.

“Can we go after we eat?” Rafinha seemed to be in full agreement with Inglis.

“Absolutely not! It would be rude to keep them waiting!”

“Well, if we have to...” Rafinha sighed.

“Let’s make this quick, Rani.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

“They’re waiting in my office. Let’s go,” Principal Miriela prompted. Inglis and the others left the cafeteria behind and headed to Miriela’s office.

“Phew, I caught them before they could ransack the cafeteria... The budget’s bad enough with the rebuilding, any savings I can find...” Principal Miriela muttered quietly to herself.

With that under her breath, they all arrived at the principal’s office.

“Inglis!”

“Rafinha!”

Waiting for them were two beautiful adult women.

“Mom!”

“Mother!”

It was Inglis’s mother, Serena, and her aunt, Irina.

“Mom! I can’t believe you came to visit! I’m so happy to see you!” As soon as Rafinha spotted her mother, she rushed over to hug her.

“Ha ha ha... I see you’re still my little girl, Rafinha.”

“Chris! Are you doing well? I’ve been worried about you,” Serena said.

“Yes, mother. Things have been fine. I’m glad to see you.” Inglis didn’t behave as childish as Rafinha, but she still couldn’t resist a hug. The nostalgic warmth

was comforting. No matter how old Inglis got, her mom was still her mom. In her previous life, she had been an orphan, so the value of and gratitude toward a mother was something she felt more deeply than anyone else.

“Fine? Err...” Principal Miriela groaned.

“Ah, my daughter hasn’t been causing you any trouble, has she?” Serena asked.

“Er, no, no, not at all! These two are excellent students. They’ve been such a help to have around.”

“I see. That’s a relief.” Serena smiled.

“So, mother, what brings you here?”

“Every year, the duke collects taxes for His Majesty. Starting this year, using those flying boats...”

“The Flygears and Flygear Ports?”

“Yes. This year, officials from the capital came to help with the transport.”

“That’s good to hear. It’s a lot faster than shipping via ground travel.”

Until now, the taxes would have been sent by road. It took a long time to travel from the frontier region of Ymir, and there was the danger of magicite beast attacks. Sending Flygears from the capital was both quicker and safer. They wouldn’t be attacked by magicite beasts on the ground, and they could likely evade even flying ones. Normally, the local lord would arrange the shipping and assign porters, but the Flygear was a state-of-the-art aircraft, one not yet available in a rural place like Ymir. Thus, they had been sent from the capital. It was a flexible use of the latest technology. A clever choice.

“Yes. Because the duke was going to take one back to the capital to greet His Majesty, we came along as well. We wanted to see you. It’s a pity your father couldn’t make it,” Serena said.

“I see. That’s too bad, I wanted to see him,” Inglis said with a pause.

“Wow! So dad’s here too! Yay!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“Rafinha, don’t get too excited. Think of how Chris must feel,” Irina chided.

“I don’t mind. I’m happy to be able to see the duke as well,” Inglis replied.

“I understand. You really have matured, Chris. I’m glad you’re here with Rafinha,” Irina said.

“No, I still have a lot of growing to do. Please tell Rani not to be interested in fraternizing with men and to focus on her studies as a future knight.”

Perhaps because of her own past, Inglis hadn’t been able to get Rafinha to stop talking about how so-and-so was cool, or how so-and-so was her type, or how wonderful Ambassador Theodore was. Perhaps Rafinha’s mother could put a stop to that.

“Oh my! Rafinha has a boyfriend? That’s wonderful! What kind of boy is he? Could we meet him?” Irina’s eyes glittered. Her face looked just like Rafinha’s.

“Aunt Irina!” Inglis said, her voice rising into a screech for a moment. “Not like that! I want you to tell her to concentrate on her future!”

“Oh? Isn’t young love an important learning experience? So, how’s it going, Rafinha?”

“Well... I don’t have a boyfriend. Not that I’d mind one.”

“Is there anyone you’re interested in?”

“Well... Tee hee hee...”

What’s that supposed to mean?!

“No! You need to focus on your training at the knights’ academy!” Inglis insisted.

“Give it a rest, Chris. Even mom said it was fine.”

“It’s my duty! I promised the duke that I’d protect you from any bad influences!”

“You don’t need to worry that much about it, Inglis. He’s just worried that someone will take away his daughter,” Irina said.

“Please, Aunt Irina, think!” *This is backfiring. Rafinha isn’t going to listen to me at all after this.* “The duke is worried for Rani, and I see where he’s coming from. She’s still too young for that!”

“Aha ha ha... Sorry, sister, Rafinha. It looks like Inglis doesn’t want anyone else to take her Rani away from her either. Just like the duke,” Serena remarked.

“N-No, mother! I’m simply doing my duty as Rani’s squire!”

Irina laughed. “My husband was acting the same way today.”

“Ugh...” *Maybe that’s true. Duke Bilford probably does think of her like I do.*

“Thank you, Chris, for caring so much about my daughter. Rafinha, remember to listen to Chris.”

“Ah?! But you just said—” Rafinha began.

“It’s fine. Chris is the most important person to you, right?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“Aunt Irina...” Inglis had succeeded in swaying Irina.

Serena’s gaze turned toward Leone and Liselotte, who had accompanied them. “Are these your friends? I apologize for not introducing myself earlier. I’m Inglis’s mother, Serena. This is my sister, Irina.”

“I thank you for taking care of our daughters,” Irina said. It was a polite greeting with the graceful manner of a mature woman.

“It is wonderful to meet you. My name is Liselotte Arc—” As Liselotte began to introduce herself, Rafinha interrupted her.

“Mom, Aunt Serena, let me introduce you! This is Liselotte, and that’s Leone.” Rafinha didn’t mention either of their families, just their given names.

Leone’s family, the Olfas, was viewed negatively by the public due to Leon’s defection.

Rafinha sent Liselotte a glance that conveyed her motivations: *Our mothers know what Leon did in Ymir, even though they heard it secondhand, so they probably don’t have a completely bad impression of Leon and the Olfas, but still. Leone has a hard time introducing herself. That’s why I interrupted you to do the introductions instead. They might find out someday, but it doesn’t have to be today.*

Liselotte appeared to understand. “Ah...yes! It’s always a pleasure to be with them.”

Rafinha’s kindness and concern for others made Inglis proud.

“They’ve been quite kind to me as well.” Leone nodded with a smile.

“Oh, by the way, mom! Count Weismar’s troupe is in the capital! We’ll be performing, and you can come see us! And, and—!”

“Wait, Rani. Why don’t we continue this conversation elsewhere? We don’t have much time.”

“That would be wonderful. Rehearsal’s coming up. You can show them around the capital, have tea at a cute little cafe somewhere, and then go to rehearsal,” Principal Miriela prompted.

“No, we’re going to the cafeteria! We need to hurry!” Inglis insisted.

“Yeah! Principal, tea for our moms is included in all we can eat, right?” Rafinha asked.

“Er, yes... Go right ahead!” *Just a cup of tea doesn’t matter much.* Principal Miriela didn’t think a cup of tea would amount to much, and it’d be rude to decline in front of their parents. In addition, there wasn’t much time left before rehearsal, and the two girls would probably eat slower if they were catching up with their mothers after all that time. She assumed any financial costs Inglis and Rafinha would accrue would be less than usual.

Yet...

Thud! Thud!

Two mountainous plates of pasta landed on the cafeteria table.

“It’s been so long! Super-sized supreme blazin’ hot pasta!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“It looks delicious!” Inglis agreed.

Chomp! Chomp! Nom!

Inglis and Rafinha furiously thrust their forks into the food in front of them.

“Luh! Vuvinih luh elifif? Weee u luhuh fee! (Look! Doesn’t it look delicious? We eat a lot of these!)” Rafinha remarked around, or through, a mouthful.

“Uh hrifihuh wleh uh eeh awwe fan. Ifh hrea! (The principal lets us eat all we can. It’s great!)” Inglis agreed.

Leone, watching, sighed quietly. “Just like usual... You can’t even hold a conversation with them...”

“You’d think they’d be more polite with their mothers here...yet it seems their appetites are winning...” Liselotte agreed.

Inglis and Rafinha were all smiles, ignoring their friends’ comments.

“Rafinha...”

“Inglis...”

Their mothers spoke softly. Leone and Liselotte were sure a scolding would follow. Instead, the two women’s voices grew louder.

“Two more plates!” they yelled.

“Yeih!” Inglis and Rafinha cheered, mouths full of food.

Thud! Thud!

“Ho maihf! Viff ih uhlifuh! Ahnuhuhvih ahuh fenih nuhih unhuhhu! (Oh my! This is delicious! As much of this as you can eat must be wonderful!)” Irina remarked.

“Uhvuh vuhhee uhhuhiuh hoo, vuh hiheh finh! (I was worried about your food, but this is fine!)” Serena agreed.

“Fuh vih! (Sure is!)” Rafinha said.

“Ifhhih heheo vih wohhuh hih! (Even tastier with Mother here!)” Inglis said.

Chomp! Chomp! Nom!

Their mothers' paces were on par with Inglis's and Rafinha's—or perhaps even faster.

“Ah, I see, Inglis and Rafinha...” Leone began to ponder aloud.

“They get it from their mothers!” Liselotte finished.

“Monsters... More monsters...” Principal Miriela moaned.

In no time at all, all four plates were empty.

“Mmmm, that was delicious!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“It was all the better for the wait. I could eat plenty more,” Inglis said.

“Errrr, you two... Isn't it almost time for rehearsal?” Principal Miriela prompted, trying to move them along.

“We still have time for two more plates each. Let's eat! A super-sized supreme blazin' hot pasta and a super-sized supreme alfredo, please!” Rafinha ordered.

“Me too. Let's just keep it a light meal so we have room for food at rehearsal too,” Inglis agreed.

“I'll have two of each as well,” Serena and Irina both said.

“Mother, Aunt Irina, you're adults. There's no way we can keep up with your appetites,” Inglis said.

“Okay! Ma'am, could we have six more super-sized supreme blazin' hot pastas and super-sized supreme alfredoes, please?” Rafinha cheerfully called out an order to the cafeteria worker.

“Sorry to lean on you for this, Principal Miriela,” Irina said.

“However, any worries we had about our children in this kind of environment are gone. Thank you so much,” Serena said.

“Aha ha... Aha ha ha... It's a small price to pay.” Principal Miriela's forced smile twitched.

“Hey, mom, after lunch you can come watch us at rehearsal! It’s almost time for the show. I hope you can see it before you go back to Ymir!” Rafinha said.

“Yes, of course. I haven’t seen the Weismar Troupe in so long. It seems we came at a good time. A pity Rafael isn’t here, though,” Irina said.

“I’m looking forward to it, Chris. It truly is sad your father isn’t here,” Serena said.

“Yes, mother. I’ll be sure to fight to your satisfaction.”

“Well, I just wanted to see you look cute...”

The cafeteria’s reopening was a great boon to Inglis, ensuring she and Rafinha could eat their fill. All that remained was the play with Weismar’s troupe. On that stage, Inglis could fight Yua to the fullest, and she was going to enjoy it even more with her mother in the audience. Inglis had to make sure she’d be in good shape for the performance.

“In that case, a little more nutrition is necessary. Could I get another super-sized supreme blazin’ hot pasta and another super-sized supreme alfredo, please!” she called.

“Me too, me too! Can I get two more of each?” Rafinha said.

“Ughhhh, this is giving me a migraine. I’m going to rest in my room.” Principal Miriela staggered out of the cafeteria.

Chapter V: Inglis, Age 15—Dual Starlets (5)

Several days later, Inglis and Rafinha left the Royal Theater as the sun began to set.

“Ah, it’s getting pretty late,” Rafinha remarked.

“Yeah,” Inglis agreed.

Today was the final day of rehearsals, and tomorrow was the show. The pair had left later than usual to fully enjoy the last of their compensated meals, and this one was even more generous than usual.

“Ah, my tummy’s full. I’m so satisfied! Let’s go home, take a bath, and rest well! Tomorrow’s the show,” Rafinha said.

“Yes, tomorrow’s the day.”

“I can’t wait to watch your kiss!”

Inglis laughed at Rafinha’s excitement.

“Uh, what was that creepy laugh for?”

“Oh, nothing. Let’s go home.”

They climbed aboard the *Star Princess*, now a little worse for wear due to the malfunction of its cannon during an earlier rehearsal. In the end, Rafinha and Pullum had also painted a different Flygear an overwhelmingly adorable pink for Inglis to use in the play. She was cursed to be embarrassed no matter what.

Inglis and Rafinha activated the unit and set off for the knights’ academy. As they were flying, Rafinha pointed to a street corner.

“Ah! It’s that girl! Um...”

Inglis turned her head and saw the familiar young girl, around ten or so and adorable, with shoulder-length blonde hair. “Alina. That was her name,” she said.

She was the girl from the city who had said the *Star Princess* was cute. Rafinha

had promised to give her a ride in it if they met again, and Inglis had made sure to remember her name and face in case Rafinha forgot.

“Ah, that’s right! Alina!”

“It slipped your mind, didn’t it?” Inglis said after a long pause.

“If you remember something, then it’s like I remembered too!”

“Well, I am your squire, so I have no objections to that.”

“Chris, let’s land by her!”

“Got it.”

As they touched down near the young girl, Rafinha smiled. “Hey there, Alina!”

“Oh! You’re that knight lady from before!” Alina said, excited.

“Ha ha ha. You remember us, don’t you? I’m Rafinha, and she’s Inglis.”

“Good afternoon! Well, good evening...” It was the time of day when that distinction was vague.

“Hey, hey, Alina. I’m here to keep my promise! Want a ride on our Flygear? It’s okay, right, Chris?”

“Yeah. It’s fine.” Inglis found it important to be true to one’s word. She agreed that they should treat Alina now; after all, they didn’t know when they’d see the girl next.

“Ah... Um...” Hesitation flashed across Alina’s face for a moment.

“What’s wrong?”

“Umm... Yes, please!”

“Great! Hop in!”

“Kay!”

Once Alina climbed aboard, the *Star Princess* took off again.

“Wow! We’re really flying! This is so cool!” Alina’s eyes were wide open and shining. It reminded Inglis of when Rafinha was younger.

Rafinha giggled. “Having fun?” Both she and Inglis wore big smiles.

It raises my spirits seeing Rafinha smile like that at children. She's grown up into a reliable young lady. Time flies. As someone who had been watching over Rafinha since she was a baby, Inglis was deeply moved.

"Yay! This is really, really fun!"

"And it's even more fun when you go fast! Chris, give it a spin!"

"Sure!" Inglis pitched up the Flygear's prow sharply, and it began to ascend at a steep angle.

"Whoa!" Alina exclaimed.

"Hang on tight! Chris, go ahead!"

"Here we go!" Inglis said.

Whoosh!

For a moment, their vision spun, and it felt like their hair was being pulled downward, before things returned to normal.

"Aha ha! That was great!" Alina giggled.

"Are you okay? You weren't scared?" Rafinha asked.

"Yeah! I had my eyes open the whole time!"

"Oh, wow! That's amazing, Alina."

"Maybe she has a knack for it," Inglis added.

"Really? I want to be a knight like you two when I grow up!" Alina said.

"Well, we're not real knights yet, we're students at the knights' academy," Rafinha said. "We're like little baby knights. We still have to grow."

"Really? But you're so cool!"

"Thanks! You're a good girl! ♪" Rafinha hugged Alina tightly, completely enraptured with her. "There's even more fun ways to fly! Chris, set a course for Lake Bolt."

"Okay, got it."

“And go as fast as you can!”

“Do you want to try out the new feature?”

“Yep! You and Lahti were working on it, right?”

“Yeah. We finished the booster.”

The Highland feature of this Flygear amplified and shot out their magic as an attack. Yua had made it explode, but rather than automatically transforming mana into magical effects like an Artifact, it amplified and ejected an already-complete spell. Inglis had worked with Lahti to modify its circuits into not only operating as a prow-mounted cannon, but also connecting directly with the engines. As Flygear engines could convert mana to thrust, that connection meant the pilot’s mana would be added to its existing fuel, producing a huge increase in speed—in other words, a booster.

Highland’s technology was far beyond what the surface regions could produce. Inglis found it fascinating. She hoped she could study engineering there if the opportunity ever presented itself. She’d create unrivaled weapons that could be her foes and continue to hone her skills. That way, she’d never have to worry about having no worthwhile opponents. That would be an extremely effective training regimen.

Hearing that the booster was ready, Rafinha let out an excited shout as her eyes lit up. “Wow! All right, let’s try it!”

“All right, here goes!”

Inglis reached for the lever controlling the new feature. There were three settings: one for the preexisting magical cannon; a direct link to the engine for the booster; and a safe mode that disabled both.

With a *clunk*, the lever switched from safe mode to booster mode!

Whirrrrrr!

The engine was louder, a sign that it was more powerful than before.

“All right, then! We’re off!” Inglis announced.

Whoooooosh!

The force of the wind on her body was also stronger than usual. “Whoa! This is so cool!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“Wow, wow, wow! It’s so fast!” Alina gasped.

“It sure is. It’s exciting, isn’t it?” Inglis asked.

They arrived at Lake Bolt, the site of the knights’ academy’s Flygear dock. It was where they always practiced.

“Next up—waveskipping!” That was what they called skimming over the surface of Lake Bolt.

“Okay.” Alina nodded.

Splssshhhhhhhhhhh!

The water sprayed around them noisily, and when they looked over their shoulders, they saw a column of water chasing them.

Alina giggled. “Aha ha! I’m getting splashed on! It’s cold, but it feels good!”

After they flew for a while, Rafinha asked, “Alina, do you want to try piloting?”

“Can I? You won’t get mad if I touch it?”

“Mm-hmm. It’s totally fine! We didn’t borrow this. It’s ours.”

“Huuh?! Where do they sell cute things like this?!”

“We didn’t buy it. We found it.”

“How did you find it?”

“Well, Alina, when you train yourself enough to beat a Highland soldier—” Inglis began.

“C’mon, Chris, don’t recommend your own path to Alina! One Chris is enough

for me. We don't need sweet girls imitating you."

Inglis blinked. "You were there too, Rani."

"Just because you dragged me into it! Anyway, Alina, hold it here."

"Okay..."

"This part changes where you're flying."

"And this part moves you forward."

The two explained to Alina the hand and foot motions used to make a Flygear move. Seeing her have so much fun meant they had fun too, and time passed in the blink of an eye. Soon, the sun had set, and the sky was a cloudless sea of stars. The beautiful half-moon was reflected in the waters of Lake Bolt.

"Wow, we're up so high. I feel like I could reach out and touch the stars. They're beautiful..." Alina said.

They had brought the Flygear up to its altitude limit and were gazing at the night sky and the scenery below. The view was beautiful, but Leone, who had a bit of a hard time with heights, probably wouldn't have enjoyed it if she had been there.

"Alina, can you tell us something?" Inglis asked.

"What is it?"

"Have you been through the ceremony with the baptismal tabernacle?"

Inglis and Rafinha had done so at the age of six. The ceremony granted a Rune, the baptismal tabernacle inscribing it upon the bearer, unless they were Runeless.

"Huh? No, I haven't..."

"I see. Thanks for telling us."

While showing her how to operate the Flygear, Inglis had noticed Alina's right hand didn't have a Rune, so she had thought the girl was Runeless. However, Alina possessed strong mana—probably strong enough to be on a level with an upper-class Rune like Rafinha's. It certainly didn't feel weak enough for her to be Runeless at all. Inglis's fight and subsequent conversation with Yua had given

her a new viewpoint on the flow of mana in people and nature, but she still thought it was odd that Alina didn't have a Rune.

"Huh? Wait, doesn't everyone have the ceremony when they turn six?" Rafinha asked.

"There are exceptions to everything, Rani."

Rafinha was thinking about the environment in which they lived, and the world for people who, if not knights or nobles themselves, were close to them. There was a harsher world out there. This was where Rafinha's naivete, or maybe you could call it an overly optimistic view of people and things, came into play.

"If you say so..." Rafinha said. "Hey, Alina. Didn't your mom and dad bring you to your baptism?"

Baptism, the bestowing of a Rune, could be performed in churches throughout the land. It was not uncommon either for a powerful noble to have their own baptismal tabernacle, and for it to be used by their subjects far and wide for a small fee, if not completely for free.

It was necessary for all who lived on the surface to discover those who had potential as knights and cultivate them into a force that could protect people and the places where they lived. There was no reason to restrict baptisms.

Even the poorest, if they received a Rune, had a path to knighthood—and with it, an escape from poverty. Inglis was sure Rafinha was focusing on that and unable to think a step beyond.

"I don't have a mom or a dad," Alina answered with a sad smile.

"Oh, ah, I see," Rafinha said awkwardly. "I'm sorry. I asked without thinking."

"It's okay. You're a nice person."

Alina must have realized that Rafinha didn't intend to be rude. It would be understandable to get angry at such a question, but Alina's response showed she was more mature than that. Inglis wondered if the girl was unnaturally used to being hurt.

"Mom and dad sold me... So I couldn't be baptized..."

It was no wonder she hadn't been baptized. She had been bought to use as labor, but if her potential as a knight was recognized, she'd no longer work for the person who had bought her. There was no reason for her master to take that risk. Inglis wondered if the small mark on her upper arm was some trafficker's brand. She was curious, but there was no way she could respectfully broach the subject. Even telling Alina she might have potential as a knight might only be cruel.

"Servitude?! Isn't that banned?! That's terrible!" Rafinha cried.

"Well, in Ymir it is. The duke has done his best to stamp it out," Inglis explained.

No matter how casual one might appear in front of one's family—especially one's daughter—Duke Bilford was an honorable man. If he'd been Hero-King Inglis's vassal, he would probably have been entrusted with a certain amount of territory. Duke Bilford was a man worthy of it.

"But even the kingdom's laws forbid it!" Rafinha stubbornly persisted.

"The king's policy stretches only as far as his own lands. He decides nothing for the nobles."

"This is the capital! It's under his direct control!"

"But we don't know if she was sold somewhere else and then brought here."

"Well, that's not okay either! We need to investigate and crack down on this!"

"I don't think they're going to."

"Why?"

"The Highlanders are free to pluck away whoever they'd like, are they not? If we were to crack down, we'd have to enforce such a policy on them as well. They'd take that as a direct attack. If the state wants to avoid that disaster, it has to avoid universal enforcement, but then the public would act as if the ban was directed specifically at them. They might even rebel in response."

Even if the acts clearly happened in the royal demesne, officials could disregard them as something that had happened in another noble's lands rather than admitting it was a local problem. The very proscription of forced servitude

under the royal code was nothing but a contradiction in itself.

Inglis thought that if one were to stray from concepts like their conscience or morality, then it would be better that there was no law banning servitude so that those driven by righteous indignation like Rafinha wouldn't lack for a cause.

Calls of "The king does not follow his own law!" could otherwise only be met with acknowledgment. When people were convinced of their justification, they usually acted in an extreme manner.

And they had seen one such person—Leon.

Conditions in Karelia had driven even a holy knight like Leon to defect. However, there was no way to reduce or eliminate the ban on servitude to fit material conditions. A king who removed such a humane law would only be a fool pronouncing his own cruelty and inhumanity. He would lose his power to keep the country united.

Inglis knew King Carlias was not such a fool. He recognized the contradictions of having the law but not enforcing it universally; he was left with no choice but to cheat and lie his way through.

"Theodore would never do that!" Rafinha insisted.

"Remember what Theodore said. Few Highlanders agree with him."

However, Inglis had learned that the law dated back decades. There had been a time when the king who decreed it judged it safe. Inglis had to assume that the Highlanders had not been as lawless then. Relations must have been close to peaceful.

So why did the Highlanders' position suddenly change? What happened? If I ask Ambassador Theodore about the situation in Highland, I might be able to find out...

"So then we teach a lesson to anyone who won't listen to Theodore!"

"Join the Steelblood Front, you mean?" Inglis asked.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

Rafinha pounded on her back, and Inglis grimaced. "Ow!"

"So what am I supposed to do?!" Rafinha yelled.

I may have upset her just now. "That's up to you, Rani. I only want to know if you think there's a better chance of improving lives down that route...but no matter what, I'll be with you to the end."

Rafinha paused, thinking. "And if I say I want to join them?"

"Then I'll need to apologize to the man in the mask and to Sistia. I wonder if they'd forgive me."

"Sheesh, Chris, you push everything onto me."

"In exchange, I'll become the strongest person in the world. Use me as you will."

"Sure, sure. Sorry, Alina. I was insensitive. I'm really, really sorry!" Rafinha bowed deeply.

It's definitely rare for a girl her age to apologize so sincerely to a child, Inglis thought.

"Um... Thanks for worrying about me... But it's okay. The village where I lived was attacked by magicite beasts, and it's gone now. Mom, dad, everyone... So I think of it as them saving me, letting me escape."

"Alina..." Rafinha trailed off before wrapping her arms around the young girl.

"You're amazing. You're so strong." Inglis patted Alina's head.

"You're making such a big deal... Where I am now isn't that bad..." Alina smiled, but Inglis could tell it was forced. "Thank you! This was a lot of fun! But I need to go home now..."

Inglis suddenly realized how late it had become. It was no time for a child to be out walking alone.

"Oh! Let's bring you home, then! Chris, if you will."

"You're right. Let's be on our way."

The *Star Princess* left Lake Bolt at a slower pace than it had arrived.



Alina lived in an old mansion in a back alley a few doors away from Knoak Boulevard. Knoak Boulevard was the neighborhood with the most shops in the capital, and it had the Royal Theater as well. The boulevard was gorgeous—but where there was light, there was also shadow. Alina lived with the owner of a shop on the boulevard, doing his menial chores.

The apparent store owner shouted angrily at her when she returned. “You were out there just wandering around rather than doing your job, weren’t you?!” He raised his hand to slap her without hesitation.

Thwap!

Rather than the sound of the slap, it was Inglis grabbing him by the wrist before he could hit Alina. “Please do not strike her.”

“Gah...?!”

“I’m the one who took Alina for a tour. You have my apologies. If you’re going to hit someone, please raise your hand against me instead.”

“Tch... That outfit of yours. You’re from the knights’ academy? I don’t wanna make an enemy of a future knight.” The man relented with a click of his tongue.

Maybe this kind of thing was why Alina hesitated for a moment when we invited her, Inglis thought. She probably came along anyway because she had been truly looking forward to it and didn’t know if she’d ever get another chance to ride in a Flygear. Poor girl.

“You already have.” Rafinha directed a piercing glare at him.

Inglis considered this as staying calm for Rafinha. She could have loudly admonished him for placing a young girl into servitude. It wouldn’t be a good idea to make a scene in front of him—for Alina’s sake.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask you a few questions,” Inglis said.

“Like what? Make it quick.”

“Before that, can Alina go to bed?”

“Yeah, sure. C’mon, get inside! You’ve got an early day tomorrow!” the shop owner barked.

“Y-Yes! Thanks for today. Good night!” With that said, Alina retreated inside the building.

Deeper inside, Inglis saw a number of children around Alina’s age, watching her from a distance. She wondered if they were in the same situation as Alina. Some of them looked like the kids who’d been calling the *Star Princess* lame. Inglis and Rafinha must have run into them when they were running errands for the owner.

“Ah! Wait, Alina!” Rafinha called out, suddenly remembering something.

“What is it?” she asked, poking her head outside.

“Here!” Rafinha announced, proffering a ticket to the play tomorrow at the Royal Theater. Count Weismar had given Inglis and Rafinha several tickets. Even after reserving three for Duke Bilford and their mothers, they had some left. “There’s a play tomorrow at the Royal Theater. The knights’ academy is involved, and we’ll even be performing. Want to come see?”

“Huuuh?! You’ll be on stage?! That’s amazing!”

Alina’s eyes were shining brightly, but as Rafinha passed her the ticket, the man grabbed it and pushed it back onto Rafinha. “She doesn’t need your ticket.”

“Why?! Can’t you let her catch a break for a little bit?!”

The man sighed in exasperation. “You don’t have to tell me that.” Thrusting his hand into his own pocket, the man pulled forth tickets to the very same play. It was a whole bundle, enough for not just her, but all the children there.

“Ahh! Those are—!” Rafinha began.

“I told you. If anyone else wants one, give it to them.”

“Sorry...” Rafinha shrank back.

“Now listen up! Get your butts in bed, okay?!” At the man’s shout, the

children scattered.

“Do your best! I’m looking forward to it!” Alina called out as she left.

The man turned back to Inglis. “Anyway, what were you going to ask me?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Pardon me.” *I was going to ask how much it would cost to buy Alina from him. In other words, how much it would take to buy her freedom. That’s probably a bit too forward, though.*

“Then let me ask one,” he began.

“What?”

“Well, I did buy the kids from elsewhere and put them to work, but their parents had them up for sale. If I didn’t buy them, they might well have been killed off so there were fewer mouths to feed, so it’s no worse than dying to a magicite beast or of starvation. Now I know a lot of the students at the knights’ academy are young nobles, so you might not even be able to imagine this, but... You get the picture?”

He’s trying to play it off as a necessary evil. And how someone will take that... Well, that depends on the listener. Some would nod and accept it as good. Some would reject his choice as evil.

“Thank you for your opinion.”

As for me... I don’t listen. I’m here to fight and to be by Rafinha’s side. Ideology, advocacy, good, evil... I don’t need those. All I need are strong foes, delicious food, pretty clothes, and Rafinha nearby.

“Thank you.” Rafinha was obviously dissatisfied, but she swallowed any other remarks she had wanted to say.

“Let’s go, Rani.”

“Yeah. I’m coming.”

Once they boarded the *Star Princess* and were alone, Rafinha let out a long sigh, thinking of what they’d just heard. “I can’t believe this...”

“Being frustrated about what you can and cannot do is a part of growing up.” It may have been depressing for Rafinha, but Inglis welcomed the events of the

day. She could tell Rafinha was going to keep maturing as a person.

“That sure doesn’t seem like a part of becoming an adult from what I’ve seen.”

“Life is hard, I know,” Inglis said with sincerity. “Anyway, let’s get back on track and do our best tomorrow. Gotta make sure Alina enjoys the show, right? My mom, Aunt Irina, and Duke Bilford will be there too.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

As the *Star Princess* gently drifted over the rooftops, they heard voices from below.

“So you’re saying to sacrifice even him, Diego?!”

“It’s not like that. We have our duty to fulfill. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“But...!”

“Then let me ask you: are you going to let this chance slip away? What are we even here for, then? We don’t have the time.”

Inglis recognized one of the voices. It was a boy’s soft, gentle voice she’d heard a lot of lately.

“Is... Is that Ian?” Rafinha recognized it too.

“It definitely is.”

“I wonder if he’s renting a room here? Ah, or maybe he’s handing out tickets?”

“Maybe.”

The Royal Theater was nearby, so Inglis wouldn’t be surprised by that, but that didn’t seem to be what was happening. He was talking with a large, burly man with short, reddish-brown hair. It wasn’t winter, but the man was wearing heavy clothing that almost completely covered him below the neck.

“We should tell him about it and try to get him to understand!” Ian insisted.

“That’s too dangerous. I can’t comply.”

“Ugh...!”

“No turning back now. Be prepared.”

“I already have been! Ever since that day!”

“Then there’s nothing more to say.” The man turned around and left.

“I wonder what they were talking about,” Rafinha said. “I couldn’t really hear, but I think they were arguing. I wonder if it was about the troupe?”

“It isn’t polite to eavesdrop.”

“But it seemed like a pretty big deal, didn’t it? I wonder if everything’s okay.”

“Anyway, let’s go home.” Inglis pointed the prow of the *Star Princess* toward the academy’s dorms.

Tomorrow was showtime.

Chapter VI: Inglis, Age 15—Dual Starlets (6)

“Welcome, everyone! Welcome, welcome!” Weismar, standing on stage, bowed deeply to the audience as he delivered the introduction. The gazes of a nearly full house were focused upon him. Inglis and the others, concealed by the curtains as they waited in the wings, peeked out.

“Wow... There are so many people... I-I’m getting really nervous...” Pullum gulped. She was dressed in the same costume as Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte. In the end, she ended up joining the play as one of the backup dancers for Inglis, because Ian had suggested that it would make Lahti happy. Lahti had objected, but Count Weismar had readily agreed.

Despite his complaints, Lahti had learned the choreography of the dance so that he could teach Pullum, who wasn’t the most athletic and struggled with the steps. He hadn’t outright said he was trying to be supportive, but if Pullum was going to take to the stage, he wanted to help her with that.

“You idiot. I’m the one who’s nervous! I’m so worried you’re gonna screw up and embarrass Inglis...” Lahti muttered.

“I-I’ll do my best!”

“Don’t worry! It’s a lot less nerve-racking than stopping a falling ship or fighting a magicite beast, right?” Rafinha patted Pullum on the back.

“S-Sure, but my heart’s still pounding...”

“Then think of it this way. Everyone’s going to be staring at Chris. They won’t even notice us in the back, so don’t worry!”

“You might be right,” Pullum acquiesced with a pause. “She really does look beautiful.”

Inglis’s costume for the show was even more ornate and glamorous than it had been when she’d first been fitted for it. She had taken a long look at herself in the mirror a moment ago and thought she truly was quite a sight.

"I don't think anyone's going to have any complaints about how you look, Inglis," Leone said.

"I'm sure the audience will be delighted," Liselotte agreed.

"But y'know, Pullum, I think you're the cutest of 'em all," Inglis said, doing her best to imitate Lahti while standing behind him. *There are limits to what my voice can reach, but I think I nailed the phrasing. I'm good at pretending to be a guy. I did, after all, spend a lifetime as one.*

Pullum gasped. "Huh?! Do you mean that, Lahti?!"

"What? No way! Hey, Inglis, what're you up to?! Knock it off!" Lahti shouted.

"I just thought it would put Pullum at ease," Inglis replied. Pullum was so anxious that she had actually misheard her as Lahti.

Ian chuckled. "Ha ha, Inglis, you're so calm despite being the lead. Incredible."

"Not as relaxed as Yua." Inglis looked over at her co-lead, sound asleep against a prop dresser.

"Zzzzzzz..."

"What?! Wait, no, Yua! Wake up! The curtain's rising!" Morris, the leader of the second-year students, rushed to wake her up. He always kept an eye out for Yua. His only role in the play was to pilot one of the Flygears in a busy battle scene, but he was also around to take good care of Yua.

While the group conversed in the wings, Count Weismar turned to a particular section of the audience and bowed reverently. "We have some wonderful guests in the audience today—Your Majesty, if we could have a few words."

"Mm." King Carlias stood as the crowd gave a wave of applause. "Recent events in the capital have been hard on everyone. As your king, I feel morally responsible. I apologize for what has occurred." The king bowed his head deeply. "I hope this performance by the Weismar Troupe will lift your gloom in a wonderful fashion. On display tonight is the future of our country—students from the Chiral Knights' Academy! They are participating alongside the troupe. Let us all enjoy this moment together."

An even louder wave of applause arose as he finished speaking.

“Our moms and my dad are here too!” Rafinha’s eyes were glued to the audience.

“So they are,” Inglis said.

“And Alina’s even here! All right, we need to do our best for her!” Rafinha clenched her fists, her eyes lit up with determination.

“Agreed. We need to give a good performance for her and our mothers. I’m going to have fun—and get my real fight with Yua!” Inglis was just as excited. This was finally the day of Inglis’s real bout against the Runeless second-year. There were many other parts of the play she’d have to do first, but she was really looking forward to that scene in particular.

“No, if you get too into it, you’ll overdo it like usual! Try to be girlish and look cute. It’ll make your mom and Alina happy.”

“Okay. I’ll do both!”

“I’d like to remind you not to focus too hard on the fight and catch the audience in the crossfire,” Liselotte said to Inglis.

“It’ll be fine. The principal will have a ward up.”

Principal Miriela had already taken her seat in the audience. While watching, she would cast a ward during Inglis’s fight and Flygear scene to protect the audience from any accidents. Originally, this was going to be a job for some of the students, but Principal Miriela had agreed to do so instead after a request to handle it.

“Ugh... Ahh! It’s starting! I’m not quite ready for this!” Pullum’s nerves were only getting worse.

“Too late to back out now! Calm down and do what you can!” Lahti cheered her on.

“Y-Yes! Please hold my hand to calm me down!”

“What?! Why do I have to do that?!”

“Hurry! Or do you want me to fail?!”

“What kind of threat is that?! Sheesh, if I have to...”

“Oh? I’m jealous of how well you two get along.” Rafinha grinned.

“Me too.” Leone chuckled.

“Sh-Shut up! She’s making me do it!” Lahti protested.

Pullum inhaled and then exhaled slowly. “All right! I’ve calmed down a bit!”

“By the way, can you pilot the Flygear for the aerial fight between Chris and Yua?” Rafinha asked. “Sorry this is so sudden...”

Originally, the plan was for Rafinha and Lahti to pilot the aircraft for Inglis and Yua, but Inglis and Rafinha had decided that there was something else Rafinha needed to do then.

“Oh, right—that! Yes, I can do that!”

“Really? I’m worried about how that part is gonna go...” Lahti grumbled.

Pullum turned to Lahti again. “Then maybe you could hold my hand to calm me down before that scene?”

“Ugh, why do you have to be so self-centered...?”

“Wait, the curtain is about to rise!” Leone called out.

Count Weismar was finishing his introduction. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, enjoy the show! Our story begins!”

With that, the curtain slowly rose. There was one problem, though.

“Zzzzzzz...”

Yua was asleep again.

“Ugggh! Sorry, guys, help me out!” Morris groaned in dismay.

“Huh?! Oh, yeah!”

“She’s asleep again?!”

“Let’s get her off stage!”

“Hurry up, before anyone sees!”

The group rushed Yua farther backstage.



The first scene depicted Ian's character, Prince Malik, visiting a theater that he didn't usually frequent. As Prince Malik appeared on stage, the women in the audience began to whisper.

"That boy has a cute face."

"Yeah. His voice sounds like a prince's should too."

"He looks good."

The reviews weren't bad. He'd been cast according to Yua's tastes, but thankfully her tastes were conventional.

"To know the hearts of my people, I must know how they entertain themselves. Perhaps here, my discovery shall take place." Ian commanded the stage as Prince Malik with a loud, resonant voice, and the stage went dark for a moment.

That was Inglis's cue—the scene where Maribelle danced in the theater that the prince was visiting. She and the others nodded to one another before heading to the center of the darkened stage. Rafinha and the other three lined up horizontally facing the audience, while Inglis stepped forward alone.

And a breath later...

Click! A narrow circle of light illuminated Inglis.

"Wow...!" The audience gasped as one, far more loudly than they had for Ian's Prince Malik.

"A-Amazing!"

"That girl's adorable!"

"Stunningly beautiful!"

"It's like she stepped out of a painting!"

Muffled admiration came from every corner of the room. Inglis's form stood out even more thanks to the staging that illuminated her, separating her from the darkness. That was all thanks to Count Weismar's vision.

"Lady Inglis! You're beautiful!" one familiar voice called out.

“Inglis!” a group yelled. All the cheers echoed through the hall. Inglis could tell the voices had come from King Carlias’s direction, which meant the culprits were likely Reddas and the rest of the Royal Guard. Inglis said nothing, trying to give no reaction to them.

How embarrassing. I’d really rather they restrained themselves, Inglis thought. Shouting like that in a theater is a sign of especially bad manners.

Sure enough, King Carlias reacted quickly, chiding Reddas and the others. They were too far away, so Inglis wasn’t sure what he said.

“Maribelle!” the same voices shouted.

Inglis gasped. She hadn’t expected that at all. *They just changed to my character’s name. Just what did King Carlias tell them? To call me by my character’s name? I don’t really think that was the issue at hand...*

Inglis took a moment to center herself, breathing in and breathing out. She slowly raised her arms in an arc and began to dance. The troupe’s musicians played a melody that seemed to flow through her, following her moves. The lights expanded to illuminate the entire stage, and Rafinha and the others began to follow in time.

As they danced, Inglis glanced to her side and saw Rafinha move with a face-wide grin, full of energy. She was a delight to watch. She had an aura that pulled you in. If only Inglis could have been in the audience watching her.

Leone danced earnestly as her cheeks flushed nervously. She faithfully stuck to the practiced choreography. The troupe had designed the dance with the outstanding physical ability of the knights’ academy students in mind, so it was quite intense and complicated. The movements made Leone’s breasts sway. Inglis wondered if she was blushing from feeling awkward with so many eyes on her. She was a beautiful young woman, so it was no surprise that the audience was drawn to her. Inglis, however, was somewhat used to the attention due to having already been in a Weismar production.

Liselotte was imposing, with a strong expression full of confidence. She was provocative in her own way. The audience found her charming as well. As the daughter of the former chancellor, she was the highest-ranking noble among the students. The poise of someone who grew up around such attention shone

through on the stage.

Pullum's expression was as desperate as her movement. Her steps were a bit behind the beat, but she was giving her all. Inglis peeked at Lahti watching from the wings. He knitted his brow in concern, which Inglis found amusing. Every move from Pullum drew an emotional response from him.

Everyone had their own charm, but in the end, it was Inglis who attracted the most attention. A few playful glances and smiles were all it took to rouse cheers from the audience.

Alina watched from her seat, her eyes gleaming. When Inglis caught a glimpse of her, she wondered if the girl was having fun. She hoped so.

Then her eyes met her mother's. Inglis smiled, and Serena did the same in return, her eyes narrowing slightly.

Is she enjoying this? No matter how I have the memories of King Inglis, she's my mother, and I definitely love her.

Inglis had no intention of marrying, no inclination of having children one day, so Serena would never see her daughter on her wedding day, nor would she see a grandchild. That was why Inglis wanted to be the best daughter she could in the current moment.

"All right!" Inglis shouted. The intention was to ready herself for an oncoming spectacle, but she couldn't deny that the shout didn't exactly pump herself up. Regardless, she let out a "Haaah!" as she jumped high, spun in the air, and landed in the center aisle. Such a dramatic move hadn't originally been in the script, but Count Weismar had approved it earlier.

"Oh?!"

"Wh-What a jump from her!"

To let everyone see me, to sense their breath, and even the flow of their mana...

As the music approached its conclusion, Inglis once again leaped into the air, this time landing back on the stage. And, as it finally came to an end, they gathered and struck a pose.

The audience broke out in raucous applause for all five girls. After waiting a moment to enjoy the aftermath, the group left the stage.

“Mmm. That felt great.” Rafinha grinned.

“I think we pulled it off somehow.” Pullum held her hand to her chest in relief.

“That was more embarrassing than I expected... I wonder if I did the moves correctly...” Leone murmured.

“You were fine, Leone. You always pay extra attention to others looking at you when you’re feeling anxious,” Liselotte replied.

“Hey, Pullum! I have to admit, you did better than I expected!” Lahti said.

“Wow! I’m surprised you’d say so. I think I deserve a head pat as a reward.”

“No way, why do I have to—”

As she watched their closeness out of the corner of her eye, Rafinha whispered to Inglis, “So...? How’d it go, Chris?” Her voice and expression were dead serious, completely changed from a moment before.

“It’s as we expected. I’ll make a note of it. Can you deliver a message to the principal?”

“Got it!” Inglis and Rafinha nodded to each other.



The scenes following Maribelle’s rousing dance scene also went on without a hitch. While their acting was not up to the standard set by professional actors—which the troupe had already expected—Inglis and Yua were far more skilled in terms of physicality, which was evident in the dances and stage combat. Plus, Inglis was able to captivate the audience with just her appearance. All in all, as the script called for lots of action, she was likely doing better than a professional actress would have for this particular play.

The current scene, at the climax of the plot, was a fierce aerial battle between Inglis and Yua. Originally, the plan was for Rafinha to pilot her Flygear, but Pullum had taken over on short notice. Pullum’s piloting was a bit shaky, but Inglis could cover for that with her own physical prowess.

Bam, bam, bam! Thud! Smack! Bam, bam, bam!

The high-speed battle between two beautiful young ladies who leaped between Flygears astounded the audience. As Inglis and Yua backed off from a string of attacks and returned to their original positions, they could hear voices from below.

“Amazing! That Maribelle girl’s so cute, but so strong!”

“Euthylis is cute too, and she’s stacked!”

Yua, as usual for the play, was using padded inserts. “Mm-hm.” She smirked and chuckled to herself.

She must have heard that comment. Inglis was glad she was having a good time, but she hoped Yua was still paying attention to the play itself.

“Yua, Yua! Your line’s next!” Lahti prompted from the pilot’s seat of Yua’s Flygear. He was so worried about Pullum that he’d memorized the entire script. Inglis was glad for the help.

“Uh... Not bad. All right, I’ll lend you my aid. We’ll finish this later,” Yua said, delivering Euthylis’s line.

Recognizing Maribelle’s strength, Euthylis offered to cooperate with her for a time. Once they covertly saved Prince Malik, it was time.

Out of the Flygear and on the stage, Maribelle faced Euthylis. “Wait a moment. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Our goals are the same. And thus, I bid you adieu—”

“Think again.”

“Huh? Whatever do you mean?”

The lines were scripted, but Inglis couldn’t help feeling a rush of excitement. The scene where they fought for real, with no scripted victor, was about to begin. Inglis could finally see what Yua could do when she fought for real. Having made it this far without incident, all there was left for Inglis to do was to enjoy herself.

“Only one of us needs to go to the prince. If we both do, he’ll waver in his decision,” Inglis said as Maribelle.

“That’s ridiculous! A duel to determine who goes to him... Do you really think that will make him happy?”

Speaking personally, Inglis wasn’t sure it would make him happy, but it definitely would make *her*—the actress, not the character—happy. She was overjoyed, in fact. The chance to have a serious fight with someone as strong as Yua would be a priceless moment of bliss.

I’ve used every dirty trick, every ounce of sophistry, to manipulate those around me to make this happen. I’m going to enjoy it to my utmost and make sure I grow from the experience!

The script called for Maribelle to be reluctant to agree, and that level of acting was hard for Inglis. She’d been looking forward to this so long that she could barely control her expression. “It’s not what will make him happy, it’s what won’t hurt him. He’s gentle, delicate—”

“Wrong! Because you’re like that, he—” came Yua’s line.

No, it isn’t wrong! We’re both powerful. We should try to improve by fighting each other. I don’t necessarily like the idea of solving problems with one’s fists, but that’s because it reduces the idea of power to being a means to an end. Rather than justice or ideals, power itself should be the end. That is the purest way to approach strength.

At the end of the day, Inglis was participating in a play; it was a work of fiction. The philosophy didn’t really matter here. She just wanted to get to the fight.

Between the pay from the Weismar Troupe and the cafeteria reopening, Inglis’s stomach was now sated. On the other hand, she was starving for a real fight.

“Then nothing more can be said. There was no avoiding this.” Yua held her prop sword with poise, posing in an unnatural and flashy way.

“In that case, there’s nothing to do but brush off these embers!”

Honestly, I want all the sparks I can get! Inglis thought, also going on the ready with her prop sword.

Thump, thump, thump!

Yua rocketed forward, her feet slapping against the stage. “Take this!” Her swordplay was honestly rather sloppy, more like blows with a club than elegant slashes. That was only natural, considering Yua didn’t normally use a sword.

“You’ll do no such thing!”

Claaang!

Sword clashed with sword, and the sheer force of the blow caused each one to slip from Inglis’s and Yua’s grips. The audience gasped, but that part was scripted—in fact, this was the last part of the script. The directions from there on were simply to enjoy themselves. Yua would never normally have made so much noise with her footsteps or taken such an exaggerated pose.

Now that they were improvising, they backed off to start their own fight from the beginning. Yua’s stance was no longer defensive. She stood still, noncommittally. Her flow of mana assimilated into her surroundings so thoroughly that Inglis could no longer sense it. Yua was frightfully strong even though she didn’t show it at all.

“Let’s finish this and get to the kiss,” Yua said with an enthusiasm she rarely showed.

Wonderful. This is going to be a good fight, Inglis thought.

The pair stared at each other in silence. The audience watched them intently. Inglis could feel their anticipation growing.

Whatever came of the fight could be explained away as part of the show, and Principal Miriela would be protecting the audience through her Artifact. That meant Inglis didn’t need to worry about holding back. She could give them a show they wouldn’t forget.

“You’re not attacking?” Yua asked.

“Yes. I want to let you take the lead again.”

Yua’s footwork was extremely difficult to read, which made reacting to her attacks difficult. Not only could Yua disappear as she moved, but Inglis couldn’t sense Yua’s flow of mana. It was hard to follow Yua, both by sight and by her magic. Before, Inglis had been able to respond in time by shattering a mana-swathed ice blade and by cutting off her vision to focus only on the flow of mana. This time, she was going to try fighting Yua with her eyes open. If Inglis’s sensitivity to mana was greater than before, she expected to be able to sense Yua’s moves.

Inglis had been practicing noticing and understanding the subtle flow of mana in nature, as well as the flow of aether behind it. To do so, she was forced to drop her favorite practice, the increased gravity she placed on herself. The large amount of mana around herself made it hard to sense the natural flows. When watching Inglis meditate motionlessly, Rafinha had worried that Inglis was sick, but it had been a good chance for Inglis to review her training, which had been focused on physical phenomena and physical stresses.

Now it was time to see if she’d get her desired results.

“Go ahead. You can attack anytime,” Inglis said.

“Okay...” Yua held up her index finger and thumb, pointing a finger gun at Inglis. “Bang.”

Whoosh!

“Huh?!”

Yua had fired a blast of light, very similar to the one from when the *Star Princess* had malfunctioned.

Fzzzt!

Smoke rose from Inglis's hand after she had blocked Yua's attack, but now her hand was numb. "This is just like the accident back then!"

"Yup. I got the idea from it."

So she learned a new technique from a one-time mishap. That's wonderful, acquiring a new technique and growing in strength in no time at all.

No, wait, I heard her right in my ear!

Slammm!

Inglis felt something smash into her side. By the time she could see the wall getting closer to her, she realized she was the one sent flying toward it. She nimbly sprung off the wall to avoid crashing into it.

"Whaaa?! Euthylis suddenly disappeared?!" the crowd roared.

"Not just that—she's so slender, yet so powerful!"

"But it's amazing how Maribelle got back on her feet so casually! How does she do it?!"

Yua had enough control over mana to seemingly disappear, and she was strong enough to easily send someone flying. Inglis was tough enough to take the blow and swiftly recover. Both drew cheers from the crowd.

"You're incredible! I'm in awe!" Inglis couldn't help smiling as she returned to the stage and faced Yua. Because of the intensity of the mana from that blast of light, she hadn't been able to trace Yua's movement. It was like a big wave overwhelming a small wave, or hiding a tree in a forest.

Inglis didn't know whether Yua was intentionally obscuring her mana, but regardless, Inglis was having a hard time getting a sense of her attacks.

I'm so lucky to be facing her. This response, this speed of advancement—she's the most talented, the best training partner, Inglis thought.

Unlike Eris and Ripple, who were busy with their work as hial menaces, Yua was always around as another student at the knights' academy. The primary problem was getting her motivated. Fortunately, the chance for a kiss was

enough of a prize to inspire her. Inglis wanted to fight her over and over. Perhaps she would prepare ways to get her to play along again in the future.

“No good? I thought it was stronger than before...” Yua looked at her hand quizzically.

“Believe me, it’s stronger. I feel numb where it hit me.”

It definitely packed more of a punch now. A tingling pain spread over half of Inglis’s body, centered on her side.

It isn’t the kind of power I can take on again and again, but it’s the kind of pain I want again and again—the pain of a good fight. There’s no better way to push myself.

“You must have been holding back before,” Inglis said.

“Nah, not really. I’ve just been feeling good recently.” Yua stretched her shoulders.

“A growth spurt, then? How wonderful.”

“Really? Rather than my fighting skills growing, I’d like to see some growth here...” Yua patted her well-padded chest.

“No, getting stronger is definitely better.”

“You can say that because you’re already big.”

“No, that’s not—” Well, Inglis couldn’t deny that she had prominent, good-looking breasts, but the attention men directed at her for her appearance wasn’t something that pleased her.

Maybe it’s because I was a man in my past life, but the only part of my breasts that pleases me is admiring my form in the mirror and looking good in outfits that flatter curves, Inglis thought.

“I’m losing in the boob department, so I have to win in the fighting department. And I do want that kiss,” Yua said.

“Then let’s continue.”

“Yeah. Here goes—bang!”

Whoosh!

“Then I’ll join you!” Inglis pointed her index finger, and aimed it for the trajectory of Yua’s shot. *Aether Pierce!*

Whoosh!

Inglis’s thin ray of pale blue aether struck Yua’s blast of light. The two attacks met halfway, where they twisted together and vanished.

“Oh...?!” Yua’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Mm?” Inglis was shocked as well. Even though it was a minor technique, it was still aether. Inglis thought it would pierce through Yua’s shot, but they both disappeared. So it was more powerful than she had judged—that was good. And even if the result had made the attack disappear, Inglis’s calculations had still been on the mark.

“Bang, bang, bang!”

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoooooosh!

A triple shot!

“Not on my watch!” Inglis countered with three shots of her own, and light burst between them. It became a blur, and Yua disappeared into the light.

“Haaah!”

However, Inglis was already on the move. She did a judo strike backward and to the left, stepping hard and throwing her back into it. Just as she did so, Yua’s form appeared where Inglis’s strike was aimed.

With a *thud*, Yua was sent flying. She grunted as she smashed into the floor and bounced back up.

“All right!” Inglis nodded. As she’d originally planned, she’d been able to detect the flow of mana with her eyes open. She hadn’t been able to earlier

because Yua's blast of light had scattered the flow of mana around it, disrupting it. This time, Aether Pierce had canceled out the shot at a distance, leaving the flow of mana close to her undisturbed.

The key was to intercept Yua's attack with aether. Aether didn't overwhelm the subtle traces of Yua's movement left in the flow of mana, so she could react. Being able to feel those tiny movements without her sight distracting her was proof she'd improved. And in that respect, Inglis was satisfied.

But that and the results of the fight are different, she thought.

As Yua bounced off the floor, she disappeared.

Inglis gasped at the suddenness of it. She didn't sense Yua's mana nearby, but a distorted shadow appeared at the right edge of her view. Yua appeared, again pointing with her fingers as if they were guns.

She was closer now, just about at the point where Inglis's Aether Pierce had burst, meaning Yua had already closed half the distance between them.

A blast of light flew forth immediately with a *whoosh* as Yua appeared.

"There you are!" Inglis said.

Whoosh!

Inglis instinctively fired off a swift Aether Pierce in response, but she was too close.

"Oh no!" Inglis could sense what would come from the mana bursting. She could feel it strongly. She realized now that a collision of mana so close would cloak Yua's movements. Inglis had countered a closer blast with the same timing, so of course the swirling mana would be denser. There was no way for her to read Yua's next move.

"Hah!" Inglis knew she had to do something quickly, so she leaped into the air. She couldn't be sure where Yua would appear, but she could do everything in her power to evade. Being above her opponent allowed her a wide field of view so that she could anticipate a coming attack—or so she thought.

“Hi there,” came the familiar voice of her opponent from above her head.

“Wh—?!” Inglis tried to turn as fast as she could. For a brief moment, she caught a glimpse of Yua, winding up for a kick.

Slam!

The floor rushed toward Inglis as a tremendous impact knocked her back down. She grunted in pain, but she somehow managed to endure the impact on all fours before springing to her feet once more. “Not bad! I knew you could do it!”

It had been a very clever move from Yua, though casual observers wouldn’t know it, with the air of apathy coming from Yua. Despite Inglis having countered the attack earlier, Yua took advantage of Inglis’s momentary confusion through the collided mana to deliver a follow-up blow from the perfect angle.

Yua had figured out how Inglis was tracking her moves and used that to plan her next attack. *She has a great sense for this*, Inglis thought.

“Here comes another bang.” Yua fired another blast of light from close range.

At this range, countering with Aether Pierce was pointless. The aftershock would leave Inglis unable to read the flow of mana. However, even if she didn’t return fire, the mana from Yua’s attack would disrupt Inglis’s senses. The result was the same either way: Yua would go unseen, and Inglis wouldn’t be able to notice Yua’s follow-up move. This was the perfect range for Yua.

Of course, Inglis could use Aether Shell to defend against anything Yua threw at her, but she had no intention of brute-forcing her victory. She needed to win this on Yua’s terms. If she used something that Yua couldn’t counter, that wouldn’t help Inglis grow.

And I still have other options!

“This time, I’ll take the lead!” Inglis, hunched over, rushed directly into the blast of light. It brushed past her face. Speed was of the essence. She needed to go on the offensive before Yua was ready to move again.

At close quarters, I can't stop that blast of light from muddying the flow of mana. On the other hand, I can more easily attack her up close. Positioning changes the situation of the fight in many ways. It's fascinating to have an opponent who requires so much trial and error!

"Haaaah!" Inglis roared, charging ahead.

"Fine! I'll just take you down."

Blammmmm!

A fearsome sound rang out at the moment the two fighters' fists met. The two clashed, with Inglis winning little by little thanks to her momentum. Yua staggered back a step and then another.

"I'm not done yet!" Inglis shouted. Now was the time to attack! With the two of them so close together now, Yua had no openings to unleash that powerful blast. Inglis stepped forward and unleashed a roundhouse kick.

Yua blocked it with her arm, which Inglis knocked away—but then Yua twisted into nothingness again.

"I won't let you get away!"

Even if she moves invisibly, I can sense the flow of mana. Four steps to the right, forward, and an elbow strike!

Yua appeared dead in the center of the arc of Inglis's swing, and her elbow dug into Yua's side.

"Agh. That hurt," Yua exclaimed with completely blank intonation even as she flinched back.

Was that my first direct hit? Inglis wondered.

"Am I outmatched? No, I can still..." Yua's eyes were glowing. They looked like a rainbow.

"Haaaah!" Inglis shouted as she kicked.

"I'm not giving up on the kiss. Never." Yua blocked the strike one-handed.

Considering how beaten back Yua was, it wouldn't have been strange for it to have sent her flying.

Thump!

"Oh?!" Inglis gasped.

Yua took the kick without flinching at all. "Kiss, kiss, kiss..." she muttered.

Inglis took a return punch. Yua's blow this time was far stronger than before, like it came from a completely different person, and even defending, Inglis went flying.

Baaam!

Inglis couldn't recover her footing, and her back slammed into the wall.

After a grunt, she exclaimed, "Wow, that was amazing!"

Yua might be even stronger than Eris and Ripple, and they're hiearal menaces. This is wonderful! She still had something hidden up her sleeve!

"Big bang."

The light from Yua's attack resembled the shape of a tail and glittered all the colors of the rainbow.

"Aether Pierce!"

As the two attacks collided, Inglis's Aether Pierce was pushed back, ultimately disappearing.

"Ugh...!" Leaping, Inglis dodged the path of the light Yua fired, and it blasted a large hole in the wall. She had no idea how that happened, but she'd leave cleanup in Count Weismar's hands. By the time Inglis looked back at Yua, she had already lost sight of her. Yua would slip out at the opportune time once again.

Except that wouldn't happen in this case.

“Ah...! I know where she is!” Inglis gasped.

Yua’s power had notably increased from before, and the more it increased, the easier it was for Inglis to sense the flow of her mana. She assumed it was a power Yua was unfamiliar with, so she couldn’t control it enough to obscure its flow in her surroundings. When she had slipped away this time, it had purely been a visual effect. Regardless, her mana was so strong that her location was obvious to Inglis.

“I see you!” Inglis kicked out with all her might!

Thud!

The kick struck home, slamming into Yua as she appeared. But just like last time, she didn’t even flinch. Yua’s power was obviously on a completely different level than before.

So let’s enjoy this and push ourselves! Inglis thought. “Haaah!” Inglis glowed pale blue as she activated Aether Shell.

“Counterattack.”

Smash!

Their fists collided forcefully. This time, the aftershock spouted upward and pierced the ceiling.

I’m not sure how that happened, but I don’t feel like stopping! This moment with Yua is pure bliss! Inglis thought.

Then she realized Yua seemed different. “Y-Yua? What’s with the ears?”

“Huh? Ears?”

“You haven’t noticed? You have ears like Ripple’s...”

At some point, a pair of animal ears had appeared on Yua’s head.

“What? Huh, I really do.”

“You have a tail as well.”

“Ooh, fluffy. Sparkly.”

Ears and a tail, just like those of a demihuman, sparkled in various colors of the rainbow.



Inglis took a moment to make sense of what was going on. *Demihuman. Rainbow. Incredible power. Meaning, meaning... Yes. The aura of Yua's power reminds me of what we encountered a little while ago.*

It was like the Prismer that was once Ripple's father.

"I-Is that the Prismer's power?!" Inglis exclaimed.

Yua stared blankly and tilted her head. "The what?"

"Uh... The strongest kind of magicite beast. One appeared recently and absorbed you." *What did she think it was?*

"Ohhh, the sparkly monster."

"Yes, exactly. And now you have the same ears and tail..."

Why is this happening? Wasn't she absorbed by the Prismer?

Now that Inglis thought about it, everyone had worried that the Prismer had completely absorbed Yua back then, but maybe it had worked the other way around. Maybe Yua had absorbed the Prismer's power. After all, Yua could assimilate her mana into her environment seamlessly and make it feel like it was a part of nature. Could she have blended into the Prismer's own flow and then assimilated that power?

Inglis thought the philosophy Yua's father had given her—to return to the world—was astounding, despite what she had said about having forgotten his face. Yua *herself* was astounding too. Just what was she? The possibilities fascinated Inglis.

My theory may be wrong, but the fact is Yua now possesses power that seems to be the Prismer's. If it doesn't cause her any physical problems, then I'm pleased to have such a strong rival.

"Whatever it is, you have an amazing power, Yua! All right, let's continue our match."

Inglis was thankful that the Prismer they had faced hadn't completed its transformation. If she was going to fight Yua now with the power she had absorbed, it meant she also had an even more worthwhile fight to look forward to if a real Prismer was even stronger.

This is getting interesting. Now I really have to give it my all! Inglis thought.

“Sorry. I feel sleepy.”

“Huh?”

Slump.

Yua suddenly collapsed. Inglis could hear the steady sound of her calm breaths as she comfortably slept. The Prismers’ ears and tail had also disappeared.

“Ah, wait, Yua, get up—”

Count Weismar’s high-pitched voice echoed through the hall. “And thus, having achieved victory over Euthylis, Maribelle departed for Prince Malik!”

Cheers and applause arose from the crowd. The curtain lowered to change the backdrop...

“Good thing they finished before they could wreck the theater,” Lahti said. He rushed forward to help carry Yua into the wings.

“But it won’t hold out for many performances at this rate...” Pullum remarked as she helped too.

With Yua unconscious, that meant...Inglis had won.

“O-Oh nooo!” she screamed in horror. *I got so carried away that I didn’t manage to hand Yua the win!*

“Shhhh! If you yell, the audience will hear you!” Lahti chastised.

“Do your best with the kiss!” Pullum said.

This is bad, this is bad, this is bad!

As the crowd continued to cheer, Inglis could only dread what was supposed to come next.

Chapter VII: Inglis, Age 15—Dual Starlets (7)

This is bad, this is bad, this is bad! I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't... Now I've done it! Now I've done it!

The backdrop had been changed. Yua, dozing, had been stored away. The preparations for the kiss were complete. Ian, playing Prince Malik, entered from the wings, a pensive look on his face. "I-It's time for the last scene. Let's do our best..."

"Y-Yes..." Ignoring him completely would be rude, so Inglis replied with a nod, but she could feel a chill run down her spine, sweat drenching her. To the outside observer, it may have seemed like she was simply trying to catch her breath after her heated battle with Yua, or perhaps she was a nervous, embarrassed girl whose first kiss would be during a play.

No, no! Absolutely not! I refuse! I'm just not into that!

Setting aside Rafinha, she could probably deal with a stage kiss if it was with Leone or Yua, but no matter how cute of a boy Ian was, it was impossible. She quivered, her revulsion too strong.

I'm scared! This is more terrifying than a mighty magicite beast, more fearsome than any brutal Highlander, more hair-raising than my mother when she's irate, and more daunting than starvation! I don't want to! I don't want to!



As Inglis screamed internally, the curtain rose. All eyes were on her. Reflexively seeking help, she tried to find Rafinha. And there she was, sitting with Leone and Liselotte in the box seats reserved for knights' academy students. The three of them were watching, their eyes glimmering with excitement and expectation.

This is terrible! Inglis thought. The three were breathing heavily, clearly excited for Inglis's kiss. While each of them was different, none had ever experienced a kiss. Inglis sympathized with their curiosity, but she realized she couldn't expect them to rescue her from this fate. Their eyes told the story. *Do it! Show us! Tell us how it felt!*

"Ah, Maribelle. You've come to save me!" Ian's clear voice echoed from the stage. The scene with the kiss was beginning. Ian was her last hope.

If he follows through with his plan...!

"Yes, Your Highness. For your sake, no matter how many times, no matter how far I have to go..." Inglis read her line, giving a fixed stare at Ian. She wasn't Maribelle, standing before her beloved; she was Inglis, provoking Ian, knowing his intentions. She was urging him to hurry up.

Please, ruin the show! I know you can do it, Ian!

Originally, she'd hoped her fears about Ian's plan were unfounded, because she didn't want to miss the chance to finally get her wish and fight Yua. However, now that the fight was over, and turning out as it had, she desperately hoped her gut instinct was right. *Hurry up and do something to ruin the show!* she thought.

She wouldn't even have minded if he suddenly held a blade to her neck while saying something like, "Bwa ha ha ha! This theater is ours now!" In fact, she'd have welcomed it.

But if that didn't happen...she'd have to beat him to a pulp. She'd need an excuse for that. If he didn't do anything malicious or dangerous here, she'd be in the wrong.

As she hesitated, Ian continued, "Thank you. I want you to stay by my side forever." His hand brushed her hair and cheek, and she reflexively shrank back,

squeaking. Confused by her reaction, he waited for her line.

“Ah, er... I want nothing more...” Truthfully, she didn’t want that at all. She clenched her fists.

“Ah, Maribelle...” Ian’s face loomed closer.

Wait, is he going to follow the script to the end without doing anything?! That would be a disaster for Inglis. This is bad, this is bad, this is bad!

Her body went colder as her sense of danger kept growing. Ian’s face was so close that his lips were almost touching hers. *I can’t do it! I’m at my limit!*

She took in a sharp breath, somehow restraining herself from using those clenched fists. However, Ian abruptly turned toward the audience. At the same time, he whispered in her ear.

“Sorry, but the play ends here.”

“Ah!” Inglis gasped. She searched for her friends in the audience, but they were gone. So was everyone else who had come to see the show. Even the seating had disappeared. “Oh! This must be...”

She found herself whisked away to a featureless dimension—no walls, no features, only yellowish-green mists of floating particles. It was extremely similar to the dimension Fars had trapped her in. She recalled that those particles sealed Artifacts’ powers, as well as her own use of mana.

“No matter how strong you or Yua are, it won’t do you any good here. Stay put for a while. Lahti, Pullum, that goes for you too.”

Inglis turned around to see Lahti, Pullum, and the dozing Yua nearby. They must have been caught up in the dimension shift.

“Ian, did you do this?!” Lahti demanded.

“Why are we here? It’s like an Artifact’s effect...” Pullum said.

“Yes. Let’s talk for a bit while we wait. Soon, Diego’s men will fulfill their duty,” Ian said. “So, shall we return to Alcard together? You won’t be welcome in this country anymore.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? What are you trying to do?!” Lahti asked.

“Answer us, Ian!” Pullum yelled.

Ian paused before answering, “I’m going to strike down King Carlias and put an end to him. Just wait here.”

“Wh—?!” Lahti gasped.

“That’s ridiculous!” Pullum insisted.

“Thank goodness,” Inglis said.

“What?!” Lahti and Pullum yelped together.

“What do you mean, Inglis?! That would be terrible!” Lahti said.

“Th-That’s right! What are you thinking?!” Pullum was just as distraught.

“I’m rejoicing that I don’t have to kiss him, that’s all,” Inglis answered.

“Hey, hey, hold it! You don’t care about what happens to the king?!” Lahti asked.

“I understand that’s a relief to you, Inglis, but there are other things that are more important! We need to stop him, or—!” Pullum began.

“It’ll be fine. Rani and the others are defending the king.”

“What?! Inglis, you knew this would happen?!” Lahti asked.

“Wh-Whoa! I didn’t realize anything was going on with Ian...” Pullum said.

“I merely knew that it was possible,” Inglis replied.

It was thanks to circumstance that she had happened to spot Ian talking with a man called Diego after bringing Alina home. The men’s conversation had not been peaceful.

That wasn’t to say Lahti was clueless. He’d thought Ian’s choice to leave his country and join the Weismar Troupe was strange. Knowing Ian, it was hard for Lahti to believe that his friend’s personality would have led him to abandon any rebuilding efforts after his family’s lands were destroyed and Alcard’s capital was damaged. Lahti and Pullum had assumed there had to be an explanation for why Ian probably wasn’t being truthful about why he couldn’t stay in Alcard.

Inglis had just met Ian and couldn’t speak to any changes in his personality or

behavior, but something else had stood out to her—his mana. Having been influenced by Yua to pay close attention to the mana around her, she'd noticed that Ian's flow of mana was clearly different from that of a normal person. Normally, if someone wasn't doing anything, their mana wrapped gently around them. There were some minor differences in strength or wavelength, but essentially, everyone was like that. You could call it the human form.

But in Ian's case, the entirety of his mana was concentrated on a single point in his chest, near his heart. It was obvious that he wasn't an ordinary person. He had a secret he wasn't sharing. Furthermore, Diego also had an unusual flow of mana. When Lahti had earlier mentioned his unease to Inglis, she had told him not to pry too much out of an intention to keep him out of danger. Plus, Inglis's word alone wasn't enough to arrest Ian, and she didn't want to have the Weismar Troupe's performance canceled anyway. After all, she wanted her real fight with Yua.

She had gone into the performance prepared for any eventuality. That was why Rafinha had asked Pullum to take over piloting her Flygear, and why Principal Miriela was instead the one responsible for protecting the audience. Inglis was thankful that Ian was sabotaging the play at this point, but she was still going to stop the plot to assassinate King Carlias.

Plus, Rafinha must have noticed something was wrong by now. Inglis assumed she'd be making her move.

"You... You realized? But how?" Ian asked.

"Your flow of mana isn't normal despite you trying to act as such, and that made me suspicious. And Diego, the man you met with, is the same," Inglis replied.

"Ah...! I see... So you even saw that..."

"It was a complete coincidence." Having seen the two of them together had deepened her suspicions, but Inglis would have prepared similar measures even if she hadn't. With not only King Carlias being in the audience, but also her mother, Aunt Irina, and Duke Bilford there too, she would have developed a plan either way. She wanted to keep her family safe.

"Diego?! You mean, like, General Diego?!" Lahti interrupted.

“You know him, Lahti?” Inglis asked.

“He’s Alcard’s greatest general! He’s famous as the strongest person in the country!”

“Hmm...” *That’s interesting. Maybe I’ll get to fight him.*

“Ian! So it’s a lie that a Prismer attacked your family’s lands and the capital?! Then—” Lahti began.

“Of course it isn’t! If I were lying, then *this* never would’ve happened!” In a fluid motion, Ian flung off his clothes, revealing his body.

Inglis gasped at the sight he’d unveiled.

“Wh-What’s that?!” Lahti asked.

“I-Ian?!” Pullum exclaimed.

Most of Ian’s body below the neck was not human—it was that of a machine, like the inner workings of a Flygear. The area near his heart had a metallic sheen, and that was where his mana was concentrated.

“This is the Highland technology that Archlord Evel granted me! I lost half my body when the Prismer attacked me. This was my only option. This way, I can fight too! For my dead family, for the people of our lands, and for my country!”

“Archlord Evel?” Inglis hadn’t heard that name in a while. He had been slain by the Steelblood Front’s black-masked leader, wielding a hial menace, in the recent battle in the skies above the royal palace. Before coming to Karelia, he had clearly been busy in Alcard to the north.

“That’s absurd! What good is it for Alcard if you come here and try to kill someone else’s king?!” Lahti asked.

“Because it’s the will of Highland! With Alcard ravaged by a magicite beast, our defenses need to be fundamentally reformed! We need Highland to give us more Artifacts and a hial menace if possible!”

That made sense to Inglis. Ian had a point. If a surface country wanted to take stronger action against magicite beasts, its only option was to increase its dependence on Highland; fending off those creatures required Artifacts. It wasn’t something that could be accomplished through fighting spirit or training.

Ian continued. “But Alcard can’t afford that. We’d already been working ourselves to the bone! So, we follow the orders of Archlord Evel! If we do as he says, he’ll grant us a hial menace! That is the decision His Majesty has come to, and for that cause, I offer up my life!”

“That’s just being selfish and not caring about what the consequences mean for anyone else!” Lahti protested. “My old man’s a nice guy! He’d never—”

“Lahti! You mustn’t!”

“Hold up, Lahti!”

Pullum, and even Ian, chided Lahti for letting that slip. Inglis could surmise that Ian really was here because it was the will of Alcard’s king. Furthermore, Lahti was the prince of Alcard, someone who the people of Alcard had to protect at all costs. Ian had been opposed to something during his conversation with General Diego. That must have been the chance of involving Lahti. Considering Ian had managed to safely transport Lahti here, Ian must have operated on very precise timing.

Now that his secret was out, Lahti said, “Try not to be too surprised, Inglis.”

“Well, Ian did say something when we first met that piqued my interest.” Inglis’s suspicions of Ian had made her even more curious about his attitude toward Lahti when they had begun working on the play together. The truth being out now didn’t catch her completely off guard.

Inglis didn’t have a thing for princes anyway. If she’d been a normal girl, like Rafinha or the others, it might have excited her, but she didn’t care at all for titles. When it came to men, Inglis was only concerned with whether they were able and willing to give her a good fight. From that perspective, she was probably more interested in Ian than Lahti.

“But don’t tell anyone else, okay? I’m supposed to keep my identity secret while I’m an exchange student,” Lahti said.

“I understand. Anyway, can I fight Ian now?” Inglis asked. She wondered what kind of power that Flygear-like body had.

How does it compare to Rahl or Fars after they became Highlanders? Is it built for combat? Or is it for enforcing absolute obedience from those unworthy of a

Highlander's body?

In that form, it would be hard to survive without Highland's technology. If you wanted to survive, you'd have to obey them absolutely.

Then again, even though the Highlander Evel resembled a young child, he'd had a cruel personality. Inglis could imagine him having no qualms with turning someone into partly a machine just for the fun of it.

One way or another, I'll find out if I fight Ian. Considering he's able to form a dimension just like Fars did, I can probably expect him to be as strong.

But Inglis wanted far, far more than that. The biggest danger—the kiss—was already avoided. She wanted to thank Ian for ruining the show so exquisitely and giving her the chance to fight a mechanical soldier, an opponent she'd never faced before.

However, Lahti wanted her to wait a little.

"Hey, hey, wait! Let's try to convince him a little more!" he protested.

"Sorry. I'm worried about Rani. I need to hurry up and get out of here so I can keep an eye on her."

Inglis had no way of knowing how Rafinha was doing from here in the other dimension, and their forces were split. If she could see her, she could take her time to enjoy the fight. However, she had priorities, the first being to secure a position from which she could make sure Rafinha was safe. Until then, she couldn't relax and enjoy the fight.

"F-Fine. It's not like I'm gonna be able to do anything anyway," Lahti said.

"That's not true. I leave the rest to you." Inglis clapped a hand on Lahti's shoulder, then stepped forward. "I'll warn you, Ian. If you want me to refrain from getting in the way of your plan, let me go to Rani. If I can be sure she's safe, then I have no objection to a fun, long fight with you. But if you ignore this request...I won't hold back."

Expressionless yet calm, Ian paused before replying, "I refuse. No matter how strong you are, you won't be able to use your powers here. It's impossible for you to defeat me..."

“Defeat you I will.”

“If you think you—”

Zsssh!

Ian’s eyes widened in astonishment. “Ghhghg...?”

Inglis’s hand had plunged through his chest completely. She had mercilessly activated Aether Shell at full strength. For Rafinha’s sake, she’d had to abandon the ideal form of battle, winning against the opponent’s strengths. She did not hesitate.

“I-Impossible... I didn’t see you move at all... How are you so strong?!”

“Sorry. I don’t have time to explain.”

Vshoo-vshoo-vshoo-vshoo!

Inglis had used aether while she swung her hand in karate-chop motions, slicing Ian’s body into many pieces. His mechanical body clattered as it rolled on the ground, unable to speak.

“Wh-Whoa...! Kind of a letdown, though...” Lahti said, realizing the fight was over.

“Ian...” Pullum sighed. The Alcard pair looked down, their expressions pained.

“No, it’s not over yet.” Inglis alone had not let down her guard. Normally, when a spell’s caster died, the spell itself collapsed, which would result in the dimension disappearing. They should have returned to their own dimension, but they hadn’t. That meant something was amiss.

Ian’s voice somehow reverberated around them. He was somewhere in the featureless distance. “That’s odd. In the Sealed Cage, the effects of Artifacts and the like should be blocked. It doesn’t affect my mechanical body, built with technology from Highland, so this should be both a deadly trap and the best defense! Yet you so easily...! I see, maybe Archlord Evel tricked me?”

This isn't over. I'm not sure how, but he's alive and well.

"In his defense, it does have an effect," Inglis said. Not that there was any point in defending the dead. Inglis didn't think he had been particularly worthy of praise when alive.

"Then how?! Are you just strong enough to shatter steel with a punch? With a beautiful, slender body like yours? I can't believe it."

"I wouldn't say that's impossible for me to do, but there are things even Highlanders don't understand. They're not all-knowing, all-powerful beings." *Even if they do probably seem like that from the perspective of people from the surface.* "And...I also want to tell you...Archlord Evel is dead. Wouldn't that mean whatever deal he offered you is off the table?"

"Yes, I heard the rumors when I arrived here. But the plan is still on! Were... Were you the one who killed him?!"

"Of course not! There's no way I would do that!" Inglis said forcefully. Not that she wasn't capable of it, but she had no reason to. While he wasn't a very praiseworthy human being, Inglis had rather taken a liking to him. He was short-tempered and quick to fight, maybe due to his exaggerated opinion of himself, and he was willing to fight one-on-one with no regards to his position or status. Plus he was strong, so Inglis had been grateful to have him around.

That's why, even though she'd kicked him far out of sight, she'd wanted to spare his life. Killing him would have been a waste. She couldn't have brought herself to do that to him. She'd wanted to fight him again and again after he refined his skills further. It was truly an unfortunate accident that the Steelblood Front's leader had killed him.

Wary of Inglis's power, Ian stared at her, sizing her up. "In any case, you're dangerous. If I leave you alone here, you might become an existential threat to us in Alcard later."

"I think you're overestimating me..."

Regardless of strength, Inglis had no inclination toward that. She wasn't out to change the world, so she had no plans of wiping out a country.

"But if you really do hold my strength in such high esteem, I'd welcome it if

you attacked me with all your might. I want to put an end to this and return to Rani.”

“You won’t be so calm in a moment!” Ian’s voice rang out from all directions, layering over itself like a chorus of several versions of Ian speaking at once.

Then he showed himself. Just like how his voice had come from all directions, he appeared around Inglis on all sides. There must have been twenty or thirty identical bodies surrounding her.

“Wh—?! This is—!” Even Inglis was shocked speechless. *Is this from Highland’s technology? Then they must be able to produce an infinite number of soldiers, as long as they have the raw materials.*

“I-Ian’s...?!” Lahti said.

“Th-There’s so many of them! It’s like a nightmare!” Pullum cried.

“It’s all thanks to Highland’s secret ritual for creating an imitation of the human soul... Each one of me may be weaker than you, but together we’re strong! This is the power granted to me by Archlord Evel!”

Inglis nodded. “I approve. That’s not a bad idea.”

“But...but, Ian... If you did that... If that’s true...then I don’t know who the real Ian is anymore!” Pullum flinched as she stared at all the bodies.

“Pullum’s right, Ian! No one will know your true self anymore! That’s just like killing yourself! Is that really what you wanted?!” Lahti protested. He and Pullum watched their friend, their expressions of disgust turning into pity.

Inglis murmured to herself, “But just one or two... I’d kind of like that for myself...” Of course Inglis wouldn’t be able to stand being in a situation like Ian’s, where she was duplicated and at the will of her superiors’ orders. That said, if she could have another of herself, that could be convenient. She’d like to give that a try.

If I go to Alcard, maybe the facility that made Ian like this will be there. I’d like to go find out...

“What are you talking about, Inglis?!” It seemed as if Lahti had heard her.

“Huh? But see, if I had another me, she’d be the perfect training partner. In

the end, strength is a multiplication of quality of training, time spent, and talent, so don't you think it would be the most effective way to get stronger?"

"Ugh! I'm talking seriously about human dignity here! Whatever, just don't interrupt me!" Lahti yelled. His response reminded Inglis a lot of Rafinha.

Meaning Lahti's a good boy with a strong sense of justice.

"Lahti, Pullum... I agree with Inglis. I don't think it's a big deal. I'm content with how things are... No one else thought the same, though. The rest of them didn't like the idea of having imitations of themselves, so I'm the only one who volunteered..." Ian said.

"Of course they didn't! It's creepy! Why would you?!" Lahti replied.

"Because I wanted power! Just like you, Lahti, I was Runeless. When that Prismer destroyed my hometown, I was powerless. That's no longer the case! This is all for making sure the tragedy that befell my family and the people of our lands doesn't repeat! If it helps our beloved Alcard defend itself, I don't need a body! I don't need human dignity! I don't care if I cease to be myself!"

Lahti couldn't bear to look his friend in the face anymore. He turned his gaze downward. "Ian! But, but... This is just too...!"

Pullum trembled as tears welled up in her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Ian... If we had been there when you needed us..."

"It seems you *are* the kind of person Lahti said you were," Inglis remarked.

"Y-Yeah... Even if he is going too far, he still cares..." Lahti agreed.

Lahti had said that a person like Ian would have stayed behind to rebuild his family's lands and the capital. In a way, his actions now were also for his country and its people—even if they were, from the Karelian perspective, an evil plot to assassinate their king. War was something that happened when senses of justice conflicted.

"That's why I volunteered for Archlord Evel's experiments and why he entrusted me with the Sealing Cage. It was for hiding the many versions of me..."

That likely meant Ian was the only one among them who could use it. In any

case...

“Come, Inglis! The real fight begins now!” he beckoned.

“No, I’ll pass. I must hurry to Rani.” Even if she defeated the several bodies she could see, she couldn’t rule out the possibility of there being even more, and while she did, time would tick away. She had to keep this brief.

So...I need to break my way out of this dimension! Destroying it will probably cause an aftershock, which could be a problem for the theater. I didn’t want to, but I don’t have any choice.

Inglis raised her palm to the heavens and gathered aether in it.

Chapter VIII: Inglis, Age 15—Dual Starlets (8)

The play had reached its climax. It was time for the kiss between Maribelle and Prince Malik. Rafinha and the others watched from the edge of their seats in the audience.

“Ah, here it comes!” Rafinha whispered as Prince Malik, played by Ian, brushed his hand across the hair and cheek of Maribelle, played by Inglis. *This is getting exciting! Just watching makes my heart race.*

Inglis had suspected there might be some kind of interference or sabotage by Ian and a co-conspirator. She and Rafinha had prepared for this possibility, but nothing had happened yet. The most destructive part so far came from Inglis and Yua themselves. They had damaged the theater’s walls and ceiling a bit during their duel, but that had been expected from them. Actually, everyone was relieved that they hadn’t wrecked things further.

Rafinha figured one thing had probably come as a surprise to Inglis: Yua’s sudden collapse during their fight.

Inglis is the most beautiful and cutest of us all, but she’s the least interested in boys, Rafinha thought. *A shame she really doesn’t want to do the kiss herself!*

Rafinha had figured Inglis probably had planned to get the best of both worlds—enjoying the fight but letting Yua win the kiss. In the end, Yua had lost. Having seen Inglis go overboard with fights for most of their lives, Rafinha had wondered whether Inglis could really pull it off. She’d kind of seen this result coming.

She’d hoped for it too. Rafinha had wanted to see Inglis be embarrassed for once, and that wish had come true. Inglis’s cheeks were flushed red, her eyes were wandering, and her voice was a little shaky as she delivered her lines.

“That’s perfect! You’re cute! You’re so stinking cute, Chris!” Rafinha called out.

“She really is... I’m not even in the scene, yet...” Leone murmured.

“Yes, it makes my pulse race!” Liselotte said with glee.

Eyes gleaming, the seated trio watched the play.

“Inglis really does seem different, like she came to life from a painting...” Principal Miriela said from the row behind them. She was enjoying the play as well. She was also on guard in case something happened. They all hoped their fears were unfounded.

It's gotten this far. I want to see Inglis kiss! Rafinha thought. Maybe she'll grow as a woman again. Maybe she'll even get a bit interested in guys! It's the first step toward her marrying Rafael someday and becoming the duchess of Ymir! And if I tell him about this, it will probably fire him up too. It's good from every angle. So go for it! See it through!

In fact, Inglis appeared embarrassed only because she was so disturbed by the kiss that she was holding back the urge to punch Ian. Rafinha and the others had no way of knowing, though. Wordlessly, they stared at the lovely figure of Inglis on the stage.

As her and Ian's faces got closer, just before the kiss, she turned her face away.

As the three felt the urge to gasp, Inglis disappeared from their vision. “Huh...?!”

Craaassshhh!

As they heard that noise, everything went dark. Not completely dark, due to the hole Inglis and Yua had punched in the ceiling, but the lights in the theater had gone out. That wasn't in the script. Meaning—

“Rafinha! Leone! Liselotte! It's like we prepared for! I'm counting on you!” Miriela said. As befitting a principal, she was one step ahead of Rafinha and the others in reacting. She brandished her Artifact staff, and her form twisted and disappeared along with the rest of the audience, who had been abuzz at the sudden twist.

“Of course!” Rafinha said.

Leone and Liselotte gave their own acknowledgments. “Understood!”

“Leave it to us!”

The voices of the three echoed from the suddenly empty seating, but did not go entirely unheard. Someone else gave a shout.

“What’s—?!”

This new voice came from near the center aisle, near where King Carlias had been seated. It came from a large, burly man with short, reddish-brown hair. It wasn’t winter, but he was wearing heavy clothing that almost completely covered him below the neck.

There was no mistaking him. It was Diego, the man Rafinha had seen yesterday while taking Alina home. Next to him were two other men in similar outfits. They were each looking around frantically at the now-empty scene.

“What just happened?!”

“Ugh...! The king disappeared?!”

It seemed that their plan was to take advantage of the confusion for an ambush. However, their primary target, King Carlias, was already gone. He had been transported away to another dimension thanks to Principal Miriela’s Artifact, which had previously been put to use to isolate magicite beasts summoned by Ripple. Back then, everyone had fought inside the dimension to limit the damage to the school, and now it was being used to provide a safe haven.

Leone’s dark greatsword Artifact had the same power, and the original plan had left this up to her. But with Leone’s current power, she’d sweep up all the people in its area of effect. If there were evildoers in the crowd, they’d be carried along, endangering their safe haven. In addition, she couldn’t be expected to shelter the entire seating area.

On the other hand, Principal Miriela had a special-class Rune, so she could cover the entire audience while selectively leaving out only the people involved in the sabotage and the three first-year students near her. Therefore, in considering that things could become an emergency, Inglis had decided to ask Principal Miriela to protect the audience.

Inglis had discovered the identity of the saboteurs when she had leaped from the stage during their early dance scene and learned there were five of them. That bounding leap hadn't originally been in the script. While it was impressive, it hadn't been for the audience's enjoyment but to determine if anyone suspicious was in attendance. Inglis had judged that based on who had an unnatural flow of mana. And Inglis had been right—she'd precisely picked out Diego and his men as the ones who were targeting King Carlias.

"Sorry, but His Majesty is in a safe place! Give up now and don't resist as we tie you up!" Rafinha announced as she leveled her trusty Artifact, the new bow given to her by Ambassador Theodore.

"Rafinha?!" A familiar voice came from another direction.

"What?! Alina?!" Rafinha replied, shocked that the girl hadn't been transported away. "Why are you—?!"

Did Principal Miriela make a mistake? Or had Inglis picked her out too? Rafinha wondered, her thoughts racing. Inglis had written down the seats, but they had been in so much of a hurry with the play that Rafinha hadn't had a chance to go over them.

"What?! A-Are you Diego, who was staying at our house?! What's going on?!" Alina asked. The man who had bought Alina was also left behind, as were the other children besides her who had been at that house. There were about ten kids still in the seats there.

Diego said nothing to Rafinha. He didn't even seem to have heard her. He must have been focused on the sudden disappearance of King Carlias. "This is too odd. Or perhaps Ian betrayed us...?"

He had no idea. The countermeasures Inglis had set up after detecting the plot had trapped him perfectly—not that Rafinha had any obligation to correct his misunderstanding. She was more concerned with his having mentioned Ian. That meant Ian really was one of them.

One of the suspicious men in similar clothing, who must have been one of Diego's subordinates, asked for orders. "General! What do we do?!"

"We regroup. Luckily, although we've lost sight of our target, they've lost

sight of us... Except for those still here. We silence these girls and then go undercover until our next chance. Hurry!”

“Yes, sir!” The two underlings nodded and loomed with bloodthirst.

They were serious. They intended to leave no witnesses. “As if! You can’t take us down that easily!” Rafinha replied fearlessly. She’d stood on many battlefields. Just recently, she’d been in the middle of a clash between the Highlanders and the Steelblood Front, and then she’d faced down a Prismers, even if it was larval. Her spirit wasn’t soft enough to quiver at mere human assassins.

“That’s right!” Leone hefted her dark greatsword.

“If they’re coming for us, we’ll turn the tables!” Liselotte brandished her pale halberd.

“Then you leave us no choice!” One of Diego’s underlings rushed toward Alina and the other children, who were seated a bit away from them. Somehow, with a sudden buzzing sound, a mass of sharp blades extended from his arm.

He must have concealed those to avoid suspicion, Rafinha thought. But Alina’s in danger! He’s trying to take her hostage!

“I won’t let you!” She swiftly gripped her Artifact bow. An arrow of light appeared in her hand, and she fired it immediately.

Whoosh!

The arrow flew at the assassin rushing toward Alina, but it went over his head. There was no way it was going to hit him. A second, then a third arrow followed swiftly, flanking out to either side.

“That’s a nice Artifact, but if you don’t know how to use it—”

“Oh? Or do I?” Just as Rafinha replied, the leading arrow’s trajectory shifted. It suddenly plunged, grazing the assassin’s nose as it stabbed into the floor at his feet.

“Wh—?! It suddenly—?!” He stopped suddenly.

“There!” The second and third arrows also made sharp turns, piercing through his knees.

“Ughhh...?!” The assassin’s body collapsed in place.

Rafinha was a highly accurate sniper with precise targeting. Lately, her practice had been all about controlling the trajectory of her arrows at will. If she shot many arrows, she could only control their general direction, but with just a few—just two or three—she could control them precisely, as evident from her attack just then.

Though I haven’t landed any on Inglis yet...

Inglis moved too fast, and no matter how many times Rafinha adjusted her arrows’ trajectory, Inglis would simply evade until the arrows fizzled out. Compared to fighting her, this was easy.

“You can’t move now!” As Rafinha spoke, she ran toward the children.

“Rafinha!” Alina cried.

“Alina! You’re okay now! Don’t worry, I’ll protect you!” If Diego’s men were using the kids as hostages, that meant they were innocent here. Rafinha swore to protect them.

“You’re not alone in this, Rafinha! We’re here too!” Leone chimed in.

“Indeed! We’ll help!” Liselotte agreed as they sprang into action.

“Rafinha, you protect the kids!”

“We’ll take the front line!”

“Yeah! Thanks!” Rafinha replied.

Then I can fire at the other enemies from here! Now that I can control the trajectory of my arrows a few at a time, I can let them loose without worrying I’ll hit an ally. That means I can help out in a chaotic fight like this. I’m so glad I practiced!

Plus, Inglis had said that improving her skills in controlling that Gift would also have positive effects on her other Gift, the healing one.

Rafinha again raised Shiny Flow, aiming at Diego’s other underling.

“Grahhh!” A shadow flashed across the edge of her vision. The assassin who had collapsed after being shot in the knees had risen again to lunge toward her.

“Wh—?!” Rafinha gasped. He definitely wasn’t moving like she’d hit him in the knees. *He’s fast!*

It was a surprise attack, and although she managed to twist and mostly avoid it, the assassin’s blade grazed her shoulder. A burning pain rushed through her nerves. Blood stained the costume she was still wearing.

“Ugh...! How can you move like that?!” she complained. He shouldn’t normally have been able to stand up, but he was moving like he was completely fine. Not only that, the weapon he wielded didn’t look like an Artifact. Was he powerful enough to wound a knight with an upper-class Artifact in spite of that?

“I feel no pain from my wounds!” His slashes grew in ferocity.

Rafinha recovered her footing and blocked his blade with her bow. But at this rate, she’d have no chance to counterattack unless she could get far enough away to use her bow. While she looked for an opportunity to open a gap and counterattack, she noticed that even though she’d pierced his knees earlier, there was no blood flowing from his legs. “What’s going on?! It didn’t work?!”

“Rafinha!” Leone called out. Winding up for a swing with her dark greatsword, she used its Gift to extend it, turning it into a massive chunk of iron swinging down at the assassin from overhead.

“Whoa!” The assassin reacted, leaping out of its path.

But that gave me an opening! That’s why Leone attacked here! Not just to take him out herself.

“Thanks!” Rafinha called. If she could put space between them, she could win! Rafinha shot another three arrows of light. This time, she controlled them to strike the assassin’s shoulder together.

“Grahhh?!?”

“How about this?!” The converging arrows of light tore through the assassin’s shirt—revealing a humanoid tangle of pipework and machinery like the inner workings of a Flygear.

“Wh-What the heck?!” Rafinha gasped. “His body’s like the insides of a Flygear!”

That was why he didn’t feel pain; he wasn’t made of flesh. That was why Inglis could see that his flow of mana was unnatural. He quite obviously no longer had a natural human body. It was something Rafinha had never seen before. Highland probably had something to do with this.

Now she understood why he could strike her without an Artifact. With a mechanical body, he had gained power far beyond that of a normal human.

But as thankful as I am for an Artifact, I don’t think I’d want to be like that, Rafinha thought. *Did he really need to go this far for power? Ambassador Theodore would never do such a thing or allow someone else to do that. Who in the world...?*

“That’s right. This is the power granted to us by Archlord Evel,” Diego announced from a distance as he watched the fight. He was calm, cold—indifferent.

“Evel?! That naughty little boy—” Of all the Highlanders Rafinha had met, he had to be among the worst. She could see him doing anything, since he didn’t care at all about the people of the surface.

“But it gave us, the Runeless and frail, power. We feel no pain. If our bodies are destroyed, we can simply replace them. We’re the ideal soldiers.”

“What’s so great about that?! You’re nothing more than a golem!” Leone fired back.

“No. Even if our bodies are different now, our will remains the same. And it is will that is the source of a person’s power—as long as that is not lost, nothing else matters.”

“Then I’ll destroy that body you’re so proud of!” Liselotte, using the power of her Artifact’s Gift to create white wings on her back, swooped toward Diego from above.

Thanks to those wings, Liselotte was the most mobile of the three. On the other hand, compared to Rafinha who could let countless arrows of light fly or Leone who could attack by making the blade of her greatsword huge, her only

means of attack was a close-in strike with her halberd, so she was more agile than she was strong.



The best way to make use of these characteristics was to act as a frontline decoy or disrupt the enemy. She was trying to pin down Diego, the strongest of their foes. Even if she couldn't defeat him alone, as long as she could hold out without being defeated herself, she could wait for her allies to turn the tide of the battle. In this case, while Liselotte held off Diego, Leone and Rafinha could each defeat one of the others.

Then Liselotte planned for them to defeat Diego together. Rafinha understood her classmate's intention well.

Then, I'll go ahead and take out the assassin right here first!

"Grah!" Even though the man had been shot in the knees and through the shoulder, he showed no sign of slowing down as he advanced.

It wouldn't be good to let him get too close. She wouldn't have time to draw her bow. Rafinha jumped back at the same speed, moving to maintain the gap between them.

But as she did, her foe accelerated in response. "Speed up!" The tubes protruding from his back and shins spouted bright-red flames like those produced by an Artifact, increasing the speed of his movement.

"Oh no!" He was catching up to her. That meant she had to change tactics. She stopped her retreat and stepped forward.

Her foe advanced, brandishing his blade. "Raaaah!"

Just before he struck her, she leaped onto his shoulder and used it as a springboard to jump even higher. While his momentum was incredible, it made it hard for him to control his posture, and since he was moving in a straight line, he became predictable and easy for Rafinha to jump off of him. With the addition of her foe's momentum, she sailed high into the air, far enough away to loose her arrows of light. "Take this!" This time, rather than a barrage, she focused her power into one strong, thick arrow of light. "Go!"

The thick arrow of light pierced the assassin's knee again. And this time, it shredded the machinery of his lower leg as it tore away from his body.

"Nuuuuu?!"

“Sorry! You’re fast, but you’re too obvious!” As she landed, she fired another shot. This tore off his other leg, and unable to stand, the assassin rolled on the ground. At almost the same time—

Screeeeech!

The high-pitched sound of metal scraping across metal pierced the air. Turning toward the sound, Rafinha saw that Leone had sliced side to side through the torso of Diego’s other underling. With a heavy thud, his upper and lower halves fell to the floor.

“Nice, Leone!”

“Thanks! Looks like this one’s the same way...” Leone looked at the assassin rolling on the floor. Even though he’d been cut in two, not a single drop of blood had spilled.

“Ugh... You’re strong!” he grunted.

The assassin Rafinha had taken down could also speak, though his lower half was damaged beyond function. “Dammit! Is this the end?!”

“I knew a major country like Karelia would have good knights... These girls are impressive,” Diego intoned coolly.

“You’re next!” Rafinha yelled.

“Yes!” Leone agreed.

“We won’t let you get away!” Liselotte threatened.

Now it was three against one. Even if Diego was stronger than the other two assassins, Rafinha figured the three of them should be enough to defeat or capture him.

“Three on one, hmm...” Even though he was at a disadvantage, Diego showed no sign of panicking.

“General! We can’t let this happen!”

“If it’s come to this, make use of us!”

“You’re right... Forgive me!” Diego tore off the thick gloves he’d been wearing and extended a palm to each of his fallen underlings. Each of his palms bore an intricate, pale blue pattern like a magical circle. They reminded Rafinha of the Floating Circle she’d seen in Nova where Cyrene had ruled. “Focusing Circle—I will use your power!”

Whoosh!

Pale blue light rose from his fallen underlings and was absorbed by the Focusing Circles in Diego’s palms. While Rafinha had never seen such a thing happen, she couldn’t help thinking he was extracting their souls.

Once the light stopped rising from their bodies, the assassins fell to the ground, motionless. They were gone.

“Wh—?! What was that?!” Rafinha asked.

“I’ve inherited their power!” Diego announced.

“Meaning, you killed them and took it?” Leone accused. She was right, though. That was essentially what Diego had done.

“That’s terrible!” Liselotte gasped.

“In this situation, I must do what I must!” Diego’s body glowed with the pale blue light he’d absorbed. “Their souls, their will—I will not let them go to waste! Speed up!” He rushed toward Liselotte, who had been engaged in close combat with him earlier. The flames from the tubing on his back were an even-hotter blue-white.

Clang!

A blade extended from his forearm and clashed with Liselotte’s halberd.

“Ugh...! He’s faster than before!” Liselotte was noticeably pushed back.

“That doesn’t matter!” Leone extended her greatsword, striking Diego’s blade as he struggled with Liselotte. Now he had to contend with the strength of two.

“Gaaah!” Diego was sent flying back into the wall.

“Leone! Thank you!”

“Sure thing! It’s okay! If we work together, we can win!” Their eyes met as they nodded to each other.

“You’re so cool!” Alina’s eyes gleamed as she watched the flashy battle in front of her.

“Of course knights are cool!” another child yelled.

“I’m sorry for calling your Flygear lame!” one called. All the other kids were excited.

“Q-Quiet down! It isn’t over yet!” the merchant chided.

It really did seem as if they had been caught up in this situation by accident. Rafinha didn’t understand why Principal Miriela’s Artifact hadn’t transported the children to safety, but everything would be okay if she, Leone, and Liselotte finished things quickly.

“We’re almost done! Just be good girls and boys for a little bit longer!” Rafinha called out, now having joined Leone and Liselotte in the fight. The three of them surrounded Diego. “Give up now!”

“You can’t escape!” Leone said.

“If the three of us work together, we’re more than a match for you!” Liselotte said.

But Diego retained his relaxed demeanor. “I suppose that wasn’t enough... In that case—!” He pointed the Focusing Circles in his palms toward the children.

“Whoa?! Wh-What’s happening?!” the merchant exclaimed. Suddenly, his forearms began to glow brightly and fine writing appeared. It was similar to Diego’s Focusing Circle.

“Those are Sending Marks, which send power to my Focusing Circle—the sign of the sacrifice which will become my strength,” Diego answered.

“You mean they aren’t just good-luck charms?! Is *this* why you invited us here?!”

“I’m sorry. You were my backup plan.”

“Aaaaagh!” The merchant writhed in agony and began to scream. The Focusing Circle’s absorption process was a painful one from the looks of it. Rafinha guessed that Diego’s underlings hadn’t screamed only because they couldn’t feel pain.

Whoosh!

Just like before, Diego absorbed the pale blue light that came from the next victim. “Aaaaaaaagh!” The merchant screamed moments before his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed.

“M-Mister?!” The children shrieked in horror.

“Wh—?! Stop! Don’t drag other people into this!” Rafinha yelled.

Those kids had been left out of Miriela’s dimension shift because the Sending Marks had left an unnatural flow of mana around them. Inglis had been paying attention to where the mana flow felt off, but her plan had backfired. If Alina and the others had been taken to shelter too, Diego wouldn’t have been able to hurt them.

“Rafinha! Liselotte! We need to take him down—now!” Leone called out.

“Yes! I won’t hold back anymore!” Rafinha agreed.

“Speed up!” Diego broke out of the circle the three girls had formed around him. He extended his palm again, this time toward the children. “More, more! I need more power!”

This time, a Sending Mark began to glow on Alina’s body. “Aaaaaaah!”

“A-Alina?!” Rafinha gasped.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha! This is incredible! She has so much mana! With this, I can defeat you and fulfill my duty!”

No matter what kind of lofty goal he has, doing something like this is inhuman! Rafinha thought. *I won’t let him drag an innocent child into this!*

“I won’t let you do that! Take this!” Rafinha loosed the most powerful arrow of light she could directly at Diego’s face. Even if he didn’t feel pain—even if he could keep moving after being destroyed—he couldn’t possibly survive after having his head blown off. She’d finish him in one shot. She had to give it her all.

The arrow was her strongest yet, physically larger than any she’d made before. Even alone it was like a tidal wave as it bore down on Diego.

“Impressive! But with my Focusing Circle, the more I absorb, the more powerful I become!”

Her light washed over his right arm and its protruding blade, which he used to swat the arrow away.

Fwoosh!

“Huh?! It didn’t work?! Then take this!” Rafinha yelled.

Following her intent, the one large arrow of light split into many smaller beams. They rained upon Diego’s body in one movement together.

“Ngh! You’re too clever for your own good!” With her overwhelming volley spread at such a close range, it would be hard for him to block or evade them all. Forced onto the defensive, Diego crossed his stout arms over his body.

Thwop! Thwop! Thwop!

“Gaaah!”

The arrows tore through Diego’s body. They pierced his cheeks and ears, which were still flesh and blood. However, because Rafinha had been forced to split her one focused attack into multiple smaller ones, she had diffused its power; it wasn’t the decisive strike to the head that she wanted. If her opponent had had a normal body, many light wounds like this would slow them down and sap their will to fight. However, Diego wasn’t normal. He had a mechanical body, and that part of him didn’t feel any pain from her volley. A

few scratches were nothing to him.

In the end, her attack wasn't that effective, but it was better than him crushing her.

Besides... Rafinha turned to her friends. "Leone! Liselotte! Your turn!"

"Of course!"

"Understood!"

I gave them an opening!

Following Rafinha's shot, Leone and Liselotte had already closed in.

Claaang!

Their attacks struck against Diego's body and echoed.

"Ugh...! I can't cut him!" Leone complained.

"Even though you chopped the other one in half?!" Liselotte asked, stunned.

"Don't underestimate me! This Focusing Circle lets me surpass my original strength as I gather more power! Your attacks mean nothing to me now!" Diego flung away Leone and Liselotte with his fists.

They crashed forcefully into a wall. He was far more intense than before thanks to the mana he'd absorbed from Alina.

"Guh..."

"Aaah..."

"I won't let you interfere! Stay out of my way!" Diego swiftly fired chains with an attached pointed cone from his arms. They snaked around as if they had their own will, constricting Leone and Liselotte before the tip of the cone plunged deep into the wall, trapping them off the ground.

"I-I can't move..." Leone grunted.

"Th-This is..."

No matter how hard they struggled, they wouldn't free themselves anytime

soon.

“Leone! Liselotte!”

“R-Rafinha, try to buy us some time!” Leone called.

“Ensure that Inglis can make it back here before it’s too late!” Liselotte said.

If Inglis were here, that would solve things, but Diego wasn’t going to wait around. He once again turned a palm inscribed with the Focusing Circle toward Alina.

“Aaaaaah!” she shrieked.

“Alina!” Rafinha cried.

“H-Help me, Rafinha! It hurts!”

“Okay! Just hold on!” Rafinha tried to run to the girl, but something suddenly caught her legs. “Ah! What?!”

She looked down at her ankles. Similar chains had broken through the floor at her feet and wrapped around her legs. She was stuck.

“When did you—?! Let me go! I have to save Alina!”

“Give up. The superior power within this child... We will make it the foundation for our cause.”

“Don’t even think about it! Alina’s life is her own!”

“Oh, really? If she’s going to toil her life away in a rundown merchant’s house, she may as well sacrifice herself for something greater.”

“You have no right to say that!”

I won’t let that happen! I can’t believe he’d do that to such a small, sweet, innocent child!

Rafinha’s blood boiled as she watched Alina sob and tremble in pain. Unlike herself, raised in a happy environment with no limits, Alina had been struggling since she was a little girl. Rafinha couldn’t even imagine the hardship the girl had endured.

All I wanted was to give her some fun memories of watching our performance.

I won't let him crush her happiness, no matter what lofty goal or purpose he has!

Rafinha had seen many of the atrocities from Highlanders—but this was among the worst she'd witnessed.

Silent but determined, Rafinha drew her bow. An arrow of light grew bigger and bigger.

"This is pointless. Stop it," Diego said.

"What?!" Rafinha snapped.

"I can tell you're waiting for something. Why don't you sit back rather than trying to interfere? If you simply watch, I won't touch you. I might even spare your life, on certain conditions. As you can see, I'm busy absorbing this girl's power."

"Don't underestimate me!"

There's no way I can sacrifice Alina! Rafinha answered with an arrow rather than speaking those words. The dense arrow of light was unchanged from before, but it changed from white to aqua.

"Hmph. Then I'll start with you!"

"Burst!"

Thwop! Thwop! Thwop!

A torrent of aqua bolts of light fell toward Diego.

"Is that all you have to show me?" This time, Diego didn't even pause in draining Alina's strength. He simply held up his left hand in defense. As the volley of arrows struck him, not a single new wound appeared. In fact, the opposite happened. The piercing wounds on his face healed without a trace.

"Ha ha ha... Not only does it no longer hurt me, it heals me! What incredible power I've found!" Diego laughed.

Actually, he misunderstood what had just happened—Rafinha wasn't about

to correct him, though.

I-It worked! That means...! Rafinha thought, pleased.

Her new Artifact had two Gifts. The first was the same as her previous one—to create and control arrows of light. The second was the power to heal the wounded. Until now, she'd only used that healing Gift in direct contact with its target.

But the aqua-colored arrows of light she'd let loose were a combination of both gifts. These arrows healed, rather than hurt, those who they struck. She'd experimented first on Diego, not caring whether it had failed on him. It was a technique she'd been practicing, but this was the first time it had worked so well.

"Then I can do this! Alina, hold on!" Rafinha aimed her bow at Alina—specifically at the shining Sending Marks on her forearms. Rafinha couldn't move, so this was her only option to save Alina.

"Aaaaaah! It hurts, it hurts!"

"I'm going to help you now! It might hurt a little bit, but sit still for me!" Rafinha quickly fired a two-arrow burst.

Thwap! Thwap!

The two arrows were different colors. The first was white, her standard offensive arrow, but the one that followed was a healing arrow of blue light.

The first arrow shot through Alina's forearms, wounding her. "Aaah!" Of course it would hurt.

But when the next arrow touched those wounds...

"Ah—huh? It...it doesn't hurt anymore?" Alina wondered aloud. Her injuries were suddenly gone—as were the Sending Marks. The light that Diego had been drawing from Alina disappeared.

Diego grunted in surprise. "But I wasn't finished absorbing her power!"

"Too bad for you! I won't let you hurt her!" Rafinha's first arrow had cut away

the Sending Marks, and the second had healed her. The Sending Marks were foreign to Alina's body. Even if she were healed, they wouldn't regrow. Rafinha's whole plan had been to remove them.

It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision, but it had worked. Her daily practice had paid off. Seeing that for herself, she could finally think that she'd grown somewhat.

"I see... Then, I'll get rid of you all—starting with you!" Diego rushed toward Rafinha with incredible speed.

"Ugh!" With her ankles bound, she couldn't move to keep her distance.

"I can carve as many Sending Marks as I want! I'll start by carving some into you and absorbing your mana!"

"No, thanks!" She blocked his blade with her bow, but he overpowered her. Her bow fell to the ground. "Ah—!" She desperately reached out a hand to pick it up, but he was too close.

"Not happening!" An iron fist flew toward her face.

Blaaam!

Suddenly, there was an ear-splitting noise, and the earth shook. A mass of blue light blew the roof off of the theater.

It was an Aether Strike.

"Wh-What just happened?!" Diego gasped.

"I could ask the same of you." There was a calm, clear voice and a beautiful figure. Her platinum-blond hair shone.

Inglis smiled as she caught the punch Diego had meant for Rafinha.

Chapter IX: Inglis, Age 15—Dual Starlets (9)

“What were you just trying to do?”

“Wh —?! Who are you?!”

“Answer me, please. Were you, perhaps, trying to hurt Rani?” Inglis’s voice was as intense as her grip on Diego’s fist.

“What’s going on? Who the hell are you?!” Diego’s eyes widened in shock as his mechanical fist creaked.

But I absorbed power from both my subordinates and that girl with so much mana, he thought. I’ve reached a point where I can overwhelm even the upper-class Rune-bearing knights of a major country like Karelia. I know as much from previous fights. So... Why? This girl with silver hair doesn’t even have an Artifact. And even if she did, there’s no Rune on her right hand.

It was the delicate, pale hand of a beautiful woman. So why was it able to nearly crush his own hand of steel?

Krrrrr-krshh!

No, that wasn’t right—it had *completely* crushed his hand. The metal groaned as it crumpled and pulled away from his arm. “Wh —?!”

“So you’re the same way, I guess. You have a body like a Flygear’s machinery...” she murmured.

Diego couldn’t feel pain in any part of his body that was mechanical, so the loss of a hand was nothing —but *how* it had happened left him with unfathomable dread.

“Good job, Chris! You crushed his Focusing Circle! Now he can’t absorb other people’s power!”

“Ah...!” It sounded to Inglis as though she had destroyed the key to some

important power of his. She may have regretted that a bit, but this was no time to say so. Inglis shoved his crumpled fist to the floor and stomped on it. “Then, shall I crush the other one too? Fists which would strike at Rani have no reason to exist.”

“D-Don’t mess around with me!” Diego extended a blade from his arm and slashed at her.

Smack!

Inglis caught the blade between her fingers and stopped it, and Diego gasped.

“I’m being quite serious here.” Inglis smoothly jabbed a fist into Diego’s gut. It didn’t look like there was much force behind it, and yet...

Blammmmmmm!

“Gaaah!” His body bent over as he was sent flying toward the stage and into a wall.

“Rani, are you okay?” As soon as Diego was blown away, Inglis knelt at Rafinha’s side, easily tearing away the chains that bound her ankles.

Rafinha answered by pouting and turning away.

“Huh?! S-Sorry, are you mad I took so long?”

“No, it’s not like that. Thanks, Chris, I was in trouble there,” she said after some hesitation.

“O-Okay...?” *So why is she mad? She looks like she’s about to cry.*

“I’m just mad at myself! I couldn’t protect Alina from that scumbag on my own...”

When Inglis had scanned the audience’s mana, she had noticed that Alina and the other children had also had unnatural flows of mana, although not to the degree of Ian or Diego. It was like it was focused on one point in their body, ready to come out, or even to burst out. With no real proof even that Ian and

Diego were going to start anything, all she could do was hope they were uninvolved while leaving them off the list to be whisked away. She was glad that Alina and the other children weren't at fault —but that had meant they'd been caught up in it.

So I should deal with that, she thought.

“That's right...” Inglis stroked Rafinha's hair. “It's good to have regrets. They'll help you grow, Rani. I have high expectations for where they'll bring you... But for today, let me take them out, okay?”

“Okay... Beat him up!”

“Ha ha, leave it to me.” Inglis cast her eyes toward the stage.

Diego was there, embedded in the wall —and also present were those who had been taken to the same other dimension as her: Lahti, Pullum, and dozens of people who looked like Ian.

“Wh-Why are there that many Ians?! What's going on?!” Rafinha shouted in shock.

“He's like Diego. They both have a body like a Flygear's machinery. There's so many because they...duplicated him,” Inglis explained. “His heart, his body — He said he chose this.”

“Oh no... There's no way to tell which one is really him... Does he care so little about himself? That's so sad...” A bit of sorrow showed through in Rafinha's expression. Lahti and Pullum had reacted the same way. It was hard for them to see him like this.

“We don't need your pity!” the many copies of Ian replied in unison.

“Th-This is a nightmare...” remarked Leone, bound to the wall in the seating area but otherwise unharmed.

“Yes. How terrifying.” Liselotte was in a similar predicament to Leone. Even they were unnerved.

There was one other person around.

“Mmmm. That was a good nap.” Yua, who had happily dozed through her trip to the other dimension, suddenly jerked awake. The rainbow ears and tail she'd

grown before were gone.

“Yua!”

“Hm...?” Rubbing her sleepy eyes, Yua looked around. “Oh, wow. There’s so many cute guys. Is this heaven? Am I dreaming?” A hint of a smile spread over her face.

For someone like Yua, normally near-expressionless and hard to read, the change was obvious. She was overjoyed. That comment was very Yua. Everyone around her was scared or creeped out, but not her.

“Yua, listen! This is real!” Inglis yelled.

“And it’s not good!” Rafinha continued.

“Well, can I have one for myself, then? There’s so many. No one’s going to mind.” Yua picked up the nearest Ian by the scruff of his neck and shoved him under her arm as if she was going to take him home with her. That mechanized body must have been several times heavier than a normal person, but he might as well have been a kitten in her arms.

“Er, Yua? I have something very important to do, so I’m kind of busy right now...” the Ian in her grip said.

“It’s fine. There’s so many of you, no one will notice if one’s slacking off.”

“No, if our strength and our hearts aren’t as one —” He squirmed in her embrace.

Then there was a scream as Diego burst forth from the wall. “Grahhhhh!”

“Diego! Thank goodness, are you okay?! What happened?!” Every Ian asked.

“Ian! You betrayed us, didn’t you?! Just as we were about to make our move, our target disappeared! That could have only happened if they knew in advance!”

“N-No, I didn’t! It’s not like that! Inglis saw through us. She’s fearsome! We need to work together —!”

“Very well, I could use your strength—by absorbing your power!” Diego thrust out his left palm, and writing reminiscent of Highlander rose from it.

“That’s a Focusing Circle! He had another one!” Rafinha shouted, surprised.

“Ah...!” Inglis gasped.

But when she thought about it, she figured that might actually be a good thing. Diego possessed immense strength, and before she had realized it, she had destroyed his way of becoming stronger. She was regretting that a little, so if he was still capable of harnessing that power, she wanted to take him on at his toughest.

“Give it to me, Ian! All of your mana!” Diego demanded.

“Aaaaaaagh!” As the several duplicated bodies of Ian groaned in pain, lights rose from them and drifted toward Diego.

“Stop, General Diego! Ian’s on your side, isn’t he?! You’re hurting him!” Lahti cried. He couldn’t stand to watch what was happening.

“Prince Lahti! You’re safe?!” Diego exclaimed, but then he paused, changing his tune. “No matter. The command of a prince who wasn’t there in his country’s hour of need means nothing!”

“Whaaat?! Prince?! Lahti’s a prince?!” Rafinha shouted.

“Yeah, seems that way,” Inglis confirmed.

“Ahh! Wait, never mind that! Stop him, Chris! We can’t let him absorb Ian’s power!”

“Huh?” Inglis said.

Well, that was inconvenient. She wanted to win a fight against Diego at his strongest, to beat him on his own terms. How else would she get anything out of such a duel?

She normally avoided those sorts of fights only when Rafinha was in danger, but the girl was safe and sound next to her. However, if sweet, adorable Rafinha was making such a direct request of her, she had enough parental (grandparental?) love for her to do as Rafinha wished.

Meanwhile, Ian’s voice echoed from the many bodies toward his old friend. “Let him do it, Lahti!”

“Ian! Wh-Why?!” Lahti yelled.

Rather than replying, the various copies of Ian spoke to Diego one by one.

“Diego, I don’t mind if you take my power.”

“So complete our mission!”

“If it’s for that purpose, I welcome it!”

“For our homeland! For Alcard!”

Then they collapsed, their power drained.

“Ian, you’re —?! I’m sorry for doubting you! I accept your power and your will!” Now that Diego had absorbed the abundant mana from all those bodies, his own was covered in a buzzing glow as if he’d been electrified.

Inglis could sense in him power far beyond what he’d had before. *This Focusing Circle is a fascinating technique*, she couldn’t help thinking.

“Thank you...” The last Ian on stage collapsed, a smile on his face.

Diego turned to Inglis, glaring at her. “This is our... This is Alcard’s power and will! I’ll crush you with them!”

“Power and will aren’t related at all —if you’re going to fight me, do it with power.”

“Silence! Grahhhhh!” With a battle cry that was half a guttural scream, Diego rushed toward Inglis. He was different than before. He rocketed toward her as intense as an arrow of light.

“Haaaah!”

Crrraaack!

Inglis brought an elbow down on his neck as he charged toward her.

Slam!

His heavy metal body creaked and crumpled as it smashed into the floor with unnatural force.

“Gah! Wh-What?! But I’m so strong now! Are you some kind of monster?”

“What makes you say that? I’m just a normal girl.” Inglis spoke calmly as she lifted Diego by his neck. “Anyway, was that all you have? Can’t you give me a bit more?” She was, to be honest, not satisfied at all. He wasn’t even up to the standard Evel had set recently. It would have been nice to get at least that much of a fight.

“Ugh... If I absorb more power... More...!”

Inglis let Diego drop, and he thudded to the floor. “Well, go ahead, then. Absorb as much power as you want.”

“You...! I’ll make you regret this!” His gaze turned to the corner where Alina and the other children had taken refuge.

“No! Absolutely not! Stop him, Chris! Stop him or I’m done with you!” Rafinha screamed. She was serious too.

“Done with me”? I’ve never seen her like this. She’s never said anything like that before.

“Huh?! Ah, o-okay!” Inglis absolutely didn’t want to ruin her relationship with Rafinha. She couldn’t imagine no longer being with her. She had no idea how she’d go on living if that happened. Panicking, Inglis again picked up Diego by the neck.

“He’s absorbing the mana of Alina and the other kids! He’s going to do to them what he did to Ian! We can’t let that happen!”

“Eh?! Now I see the problem. That *is* bad .” Inglis had no intention of letting that happen.

The more someone thinks they have lofty ideals and noble goals, the more likely they are to embrace the harshest means, even if it involves innocent people —and this is an archetypal example, Inglis thought. *So I need to take him down.*

“No, I don’t need to do that anymore!” Diego said, while still hanging from

her hand.

“What do you mean?” Inglis asked.

“Look at the hand you’re holding me with!”

“Hm? What’s this on me?”

“That’s a Sending Mark! Be careful, Chris! He’s trying to absorb your power now!” Rafinha said.

“It’s too late! I’ll kill you with your own strength!” Diego taunted.

“Oh, that sounds great!” Inglis answered.

“Huh?!” Doubtful gasps rang out from all around her.

“Well, I mean... If he’s absorbing it from me, that means he isn’t harming Alina or the other kids... So it’s fine, right, Rani? Right?”

“W-Well... Kind of...” Rafinha replied.

“All right, then let’s do this! Go ahead, absorb as much power as you want.”

“H-How far are you going to go to make light of me?” Diego demanded.

“I just want to see you at your best. Absorb as much as you can, and fight me as hard as you can. That’s the least you can do to atone for having attacked Rani.”

“Very well! You’re going to regret this!”

Inglis sent the mana around her toward Diego. The glow around him increased and expanded.

“Bwa ha ha ha! Such incredible power! What I experienced before doesn’t hold a candle to this! Compared to yours, that of the children and Ian was a mere pittance! It’s wonderful! Wonderful!” Diego shouted, half-crazed, perhaps excited by the sheer volume of mana flowing to him from Inglis. His initial composure was completely gone.

“Excellent. Get strong for me, okay?” Inglis smiled and nodded to Diego.

Suddenly, the light flowing from her to him blinked out. “Ha... Ha ha ha ha! I’ve absorbed it all! You’re nothing to me now! Prepare yourself —”

“You’re mistaken. There’s plenty more.” The absorbed mana was merely a portion of Inglis’s aether. She could simply convert more aether into mana as she needed. She was in no danger of running out yet.

“Hmm? The power is flowing into me again... What’s going on? I thought I had drained you dry.”

“Now, now, let’s not worry too much about the details. Power is good, right?”

“Bwa ha ha ha! No one can stop me now! I’ve absorbed it all. Now di —”

“No, no, it’s still too early to say that. Have some more mana.”

“Ha ha ha! I can beat you! I can kill you! You, and anything in this world! I’ve obtained ultimate power!”

“That’s nice, isn’t it? You’re glowing so brightly now.”

“Ch-Chris, you’re going too far! I can’t even keep my eyes open!” Rafinha complained. She had to squint to even look in his direction.

“No, there’s still more where that came from. You can keep going, Diego. Don’t you want to shine even brighter? Isn’t it wonderful?” Inglis asked.

“Gwa ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!” Diego laughed as if he’d lost his mind and leaped high into the air.

I guess he’s at his limit? Inglis thought. He stopped taking mana, and he looks strange. Jumping up like that, he’s probably going to try a diving attack.

“Now, let me show you what I can do!” Diego said.

Inglis braced herself as she followed him with her eyes.

Diego’s body shined even more brightly. However, it also began to expand like a balloon.

Inglis gasped. *That might be bad...*

She quickly turned away, while firing swift Aether Pierces from the fingertips of both hands at the immobilized Leone and Liselotte.

Vshoo-vshoo-vshoo!

The aether, glowing its characteristic pale blue color, cut through the chains binding them.

“Leone, use your Artifact to get Alina and the other kids out of here! Liselotte, please help her!”

“G-Got it!” Leone answered.

“Yes! Lahti, everyone, over here!” Liselotte called out.

Leaving the rest to them, Inglis encouraged Diego on. “Don’t let the power carry you away! Stay in control! You’ll be fine! You have a strong will; use it to overcome the power! Do your best!”

But her words were in vain.

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

There was a huge, ear-splitting explosion. Diego’s body burst like an overfilled balloon.

“That’s no good! We hadn’t even fought!” Inglis sighed in dismay. Around her, the explosion’s aftermath had blown away the theater’s damaged walls and seats. All that remained of the Royal Theater was ruin.

Chapter X: Inglis, Age 15—Dual Starlets (10)

The Royal Theater had suddenly collapsed as if a bomb had gone off inside. The people walking the street stared in shock. Inside, Inglis also stood in stunned silence. She checked the surroundings—there was no mistaking it. From every angle, the place was destroyed.

“This...” she started to say. “This will probably pose a bit of a problem, huh? Ha ha ha.”

She hadn’t expected an overabundance of mana absorption to force Diego to explode. Not only did she miss out on a fight with him, but the damage here was tremendous. She had felt so much joy she’d been ready to burst, but now she had deflated. There wasn’t a single good thing about what had happened.

Yoink!

Rafinha’s fingers tugged at Inglis’s ears. ““Ha ha ha’?! What are you laughing about?! This is because you got carried away! You should have stopped him long before we reached this point!”

“But I won’t improve if I don’t push my limits. He was enjoying it anyway. It’s not like he told me he was going to explode.”

“Enough excuses! What are we gonna do about this?!” Rafinha was *livid*. Not a single part of the Royal Theater’s previous splendor remained.

Inglis wondered how expensive the repairs would be. It had been a large and ornate building, so they would probably cost several times those of the knights’ academy.

“What if they want us to pay for it? And what if they cut off our all-you-can-eat privileges at the cafeteria as punishment?! We’ll starve again! And this time we won’t be able to turn to Count Weismar!” Rafinha yelled in a panic.

“Ugh... Yeah, this is bad. I think our only choice is to attribute this to the

assassins who targeted His Majesty. We can say that they blew themselves up in desperation when we cornered them. It should be fine.”

They could have easily concealed that there was a plot at all if the theater wasn’t a total wreck. Principal Miriela had whisked the audience away to another dimension for their safety, but that could have been called simply a precaution or even part of the show. With the show over, the curtain could be dropped on the whole affair.

News of an attempted assassination of King Carlias from Karelia’s northern neighbor would definitely be an international incident. If things had gone differently, the whole affair could have been swept under the rug, but that seemed impossible now.

“Let me get this straight,” Rafinha said. “You played around and let the assassin take your power because you were having so much fun, but once he absorbed too much, he exploded.”

“That’s not true. I wasn’t playing around. I was serious about fighting a strong foe.”

“Is that the only part you’re concerned with?! Seriously, Chris, you’re really just too much. Ugh, this is giving me a headache.” Rafinha let out a deep, deep sigh.

“At times like this, it’s important to trust your friends.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t blown up the theater! But yeah, you’re right. At this point, let’s go with your plan.”

“Yeah. I’ll do the explaining, so—”

Space twisted from a distance. Leone and Liselotte had returned from getting the kids out of danger, and now that things were settled, they were all back, as were Lahti and Pullum.

“Wow... There isn’t a trace left,” Leone said, wincing.

“This is simply terrible,” Liselotte said.

“Chris has an excuse planned for blaming this on the assassins, so I say we back her up,” Rafinha said.

“O-Okay... Well, if she hadn’t done something, we would have been in trouble,” Leone reasoned.

“And yet, no matter how we got here, what I initially feared has come to pass.” Liselotte had always suspected Inglis would destroy the theater.

“It sure did...” Rafinha turned her eyes to the kids. “Ah, Alina, are you okay? You’re not hurt or anything, right?”

“N-No, I’m not... Thanks for saving us...” Alina answered. None of the children appeared to be seriously injured.

“Sorry, that must have been scary. But it’s okay now.” Rafinha gave Alina a big hug.

“B-But... Mister... He...”

The merchant who had taken in the children was no longer anything but a corpse. Alina and the others called his name and tried to shake him awake, but his eyes would never open again.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t save him,” Rafinha said. “Everything will be okay, though. I’ll ask my mom and dad to let you live in Ymir, where Chris and I grew up. Do you think that’s okay, Chris?”

“Yes. I think that’s a fine idea.”

It wasn’t a bad thing to have something to protect. If Rafinha had something to protect in a place she called home, that would serve as motivation for her both personally and as a knight. Sheltering these children wouldn’t change the wider circumstances of the world that exacerbated their struggles—but it was for the better.

“Plus, the duke and our mothers are already here, so they can set off together,” Inglis noted.

“Good idea. We’ll ask them later. Did you hear that, everyone? There’s nothing to worry about.” Rafinha gave each of the children a kind hug.

Inglis followed suit with the others—but as she did, she warned Lahti, “You should probably find somewhere to hide while you can.”

“Y-Yeah! Inglis is right!” Pullum chimed in from beside Lahti.

As the prince of the nation that had sent the assassins, he more than ever needed to hide his identity. Otherwise, he'd be taken as a prisoner of war, and—if things went poorly—he could even be executed. That or he could be used as a hostage in negotiations.

“Lahti, are you really the prince of Alcard?” Rafinha asked.

He answered with a nod. “Yeah. This should prove it.” From under his clothes, he produced a pendant engraved with Alcard's coat of arms.

“I guess you really are... You didn't seem the type, but...” Leone said.

“Indeed, you're not at all refin—I mean, you fit in with us so well,” Liselotte said.

Lahti didn't take that as a jab at him at all. “Sorry, I'm not much of a prince. I'm Runeless, so I kind of fell out of the royal family. That's why I'm such a mess. And because I'm Runeless, because I'm nothing to them, I hid my identity to study at the knights' academy, trying to find a place for myself. But now that things are like this... Maybe I never should have left... If I'd stayed, maybe I could have stopped this...”

“N-None of that is your fault, Lahti!” Pullum insisted. “Don't blame yourself. Let's leave this to Inglis and the others.”

“I can't. No matter what she says, they probably won't believe her without proof. I'll tell them who I really am and give my own testimony. Then maybe—”

“No, Lahti! That's for me to do!” a soothing, masculine voice interrupted.

“Wh—?! Ian?! Ian, you're okay?! I thought he got every last one of you... Where are you?! Are you hiding?” Lahti shouted.

Ian's voice was clear, but Ian himself was nowhere to be seen. “O-Over here! By the pillar in back to the right!”

Yua was there, carrying Ian under her arm, and ready to make her departure.

“Yua?! What are you doing?!” Pullum asked.

“Well, it's okay to take one home, right? And we're done here, right?” Yua replied.

“Y-Yeah, I guess... So one Ian escaped thanks to Yua?” Lahti asked.

“I guess. I don’t really know what happened, but...” Ian said.

“It’s simple. I just smacked the part with the creepy pattern,” Yua said. She must have meant the Sending Mark. In that dangerous moment, Yua had sensed the danger and deftly destroyed only that spot on his body. Appearances were deceiving. Yua’s ability to sense and control mana was superhuman. She’d even saved someone, although it was just to take a cute boy home.

“So...” Yua trailed off, walking away.

“W-Wait, Yua! There’s something I have to do!” Ian insisted.

“Nah, he’s all yours, Yua. Sorry, Ian, but after what you’ve done, we can’t have you showing up in front of His Majesty,” Lahti said.

That was reasonable. Ian had been plotting to kill King Carlias. Put them together, and there was no telling what would happen.

“B-But, Lahti... Wait, are you going to try to cover for me?!”

“That’s the least a failure of a prince can do,” Lahti said.

“Y-You can’t, Lahti!” Pullum stammered. “That’s going too far! This wasn’t your fault! Right, Inglis?” She looked to Inglis for agreement.

“Yeah. And even if he does claim responsibility, it probably won’t mean anything.”

“Huh? What do you mean, Inglis?” Lahti asked.

“This isn’t over yet. There has to be more...”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

“Well—”

A high-pitched shriek rang out, cutting Inglis off. The students turned to see Principal Miriela, back from the alternate dimension.

“This... This is dreadful!” Captain Reddas of the Royal Guard was back too.

“Hmm... So we were right to evacuate?! But this is terrible!” As was King

Carlias.

When Rafinha saw her parents and Inglis's mother return as well, she prompted, "Y-You're on, Chris!"

"Okay..." *Time to get myself fired up and make some excuses!* Inglis thought. Not just to cover up her own mistakes, but to ensure a better future for them all.



Inglis's explanation left King Carlias in dismay. "What?! So you're saying assassins from Alcard were trying to kill me?"

"How brazen! This is unforgivable! Maybe I'd have expected it from Venefic, but we've been on friendly terms with Alcard for years! For them to betray us like this...!" Reddas was red-faced with anger.

"But if they could do this, why wait? Giving us a chance to evacuate doesn't make sense..." King Carlias said.

Inglis gulped. It seemed like King Carlias was catching on to what had actually happened. The correct answer was that the assassin himself wasn't expecting the explosion, but she couldn't let him know that. She had to hide the real turn of events—needed to cover them up.

The best way was to change the subject.

"More importantly, Your Majesty, we must consider our response!" she said.

"That much is true... We should immediately review how we guard His Majesty!" Reddas said.

Inglis shook her head. "No, that's not what I meant."

"What do you propose, then, Lady Inglis?"

"We should consider strengthening our presence on the northern border with Alcard. They may invade at any moment."

"What?! Not just assassins, but—!"

"The other way around. The assassins were likely sent because the decision to attack had already been made. By eliminating His Majesty, they'd be able to

take advantage of the subsequent unrest to gain the upper hand in the war.”

“Wh-What?!”

“Without that level of commitment already decided, they wouldn’t send assassins to a country that was not only friendly but also overwhelmingly more powerful. A patchwork approach would only end in their own destruction.”

King Carlias’s expression became stern. “If that’s true, then this is an emergency. The Paladins are already deployed to the eastern border with Venefic!” He already seemed to be focused on the diplomatic relationships between the countries, which were much more significant than the matter at hand.

“It’s true! Alcard has already crossed the border!” Ian spoke up.

Inglis quickly signaled with her eyes to Yua.

“Boop.” Yua strengthened her grip on Ian’s head, forcing his mouth shut. It seemed like she was doing it lightly, but she was extremely strong. He was easily silenced.

“The assassins we saw were enhanced with a different Highland technology than Artifacts—it seemed to have been given to them by Archlord Evel, who was here recently,” Inglis continued.

“What?! Lady Inglis, you’re saying he’s still alive?” Reddas asked.

“No, I don’t believe so. He died at the hands of the Steelblood Front. Inglis wouldn’t have lied about that,” King Carlias said.

Rafinha whispered so only Inglis could hear. “I kind of feel bad taking advantage of him like this...”

I’m just trying to give a plausible excuse for why the theater was destroyed! Inglis thought. “It’s okay. I’m not lying to him,” she whispered back.

It was true that the assassin Diego had exploded and destroyed the theater. Inglis was only omitting certain details about the precise cause of the explosion. She wasn’t outright lying. She was simply not giving a full explanation.

“So you’re saying he had already contacted Alcard before coming here. In that case, his unreasonable attitude makes sense...” King Carlias said.

“Indeed, Your Majesty,” Inglis said. “I believe he had already won over Alcard and ordered them to attack Karelia. It seems Alcard was recently ravaged by a Prismar, so they asked for his aid in building up their defenses.”

“And in return, he demanded that they attack us... Alcard is not a rich country. They can’t afford a hialar menace or sufficient quantities of Artifacts.”

“Correct.”

“But then, why didn’t Evel attempt to kill His Majesty when he was here?” Reddas asked.

“That’s surface thinking, Reddas,” Inglis replied.

“Meaning?” King Carlias asked.

“Your Majesty, if I may speak frankly...”

“Of course. Speak, Inglis.”

“Very well. The Highlanders think little of surface royalty. They care so little for the surface that taking the life of royalty here isn’t worth the bother in their minds. They may trample on people here for fun, but that is the extent to which they go.”

King Carlias grunted. “How rude!”

“In addition, I believe that Evel gained insight into His Majesty’s thinking during the summit and sensed his absolute reverence and obedience. So even if Alcard’s invasion failed, Highland could plan to improve its relationship with Karelia upon Alcard’s defeat—there was no reason to take his life. From Highland’s perspective, it matters not who rules this land, only that the offerings they desire continue to flow.”

Highland had two major political factions: the Triumvirate and the Papal League. The current ambassador, Theodore, and the previous ambassador, Muenthe, both aligned with the Triumvirate. With their blessing, Karelia acquired both Flygears and the Flygear Ports, Highland-made weapons that had not been granted to them before. However, the Papal League had a hard time accepting that, and so they intensified their conflict with the Triumvirate.

As a result, given Karelia’s ties with the Triumvirate, Venefic—which was

backed by the Papal League—had mobilized at the border. And now, Alcard was joining the fray.

The major factions have created a conflict between surface countries; this is a proxy war, Inglis thought. With that in mind, Evel's choice not to kill King Carlias reveals his own contempt for us. Even if he were to launch a plot to destroy our country, if he reached out his hand after that failed, he believed our king would take it. He believed Karelia wouldn't have been able to fight back at that point.

"I see. You appear to be correct."

The fact that he nodded in agreement rather than reacting with rage showed King Carlias's magnanimity. He understood that Highland looked down on him, and he accepted that for what it was because he felt it was the best course for his country. If he believed that so strongly, Inglis couldn't argue—as long as he called on her when a strong foe appeared.

"So why assassins? Why now? I don't see what they have to gain," the king said.

"It's a matter of differing perspectives. To the ruling class of Alcard, Your Majesty is our supreme commander. Striking you down would spread chaos and facilitate an invasion. Thus, they could limit their own casualties while fulfilling the orders from Highland—in other words, it's proof that they've decided to invade. They're already making moves. I expect that we'll see signs of it very soon. Venefic may also take advantage of this and strike."

"Gah! A pincer attack on us!" Just as Reddas began to growl, a single Flygear arrived overhead at high speed. A knight who appeared to be a palace guard was on board.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Where are you?! I bring urgent news!"

"I am down here. What's happened?"

"Ah, Your Majesty!" The knight hurriedly set his Flygear down and kneeled before King Carlias. "It's an emergency! Alcard has mobilized along our northern border!"

Inglis's predictions had been dead-on, and everyone around gasped in surprise.

“And here it is,” she remarked.

“So Inglis was right...” King Carlias nodded.

“A-As expected of Lady Inglis. I’m sorry for doubting your insight,” Reddas said, still in shock.

Good. This will make my next words more convincing, meaning the proposal I’m about to make will be more likely to be accepted, Inglis thought.

“Why... Why would Alcard want war with Karelia?” Lahti asked.

“Ugh...! It’s absurd!” Pullum cried. They couldn’t believe what they were hearing about their home.

“If it’s come to this...” Lahti made up his mind and stepped forward in front of King Carlias. “Your Majesty! If it’s gonna be—er, if it has come to this, take me as a hostage! And push back against—”

“Thwop.” Inglis quickly spun around behind Lahti and karate-chopped his neck.

“Aghhh...!” Lahti collapsed in a heap.

I can’t let you say any more. Sorry, but I’ve got to stop you by force.

“Lahti!” Pullum gasped.

I’ll leave him to Pullum, Inglis thought.

“Who is this boy?” King Carlias asked.

“He hails from Alcard. He wants to stop the war, even if it means using himself as a shield,” Inglis answered.

“I see...but we can’t do such a thing. It may provoke the enemy, and it could cost us the confidence of our own forces.”

If he were thought of as an ordinary burgher or a noble scion, that would be as far as the king would value him as a hostage. Someone unlikely to affect many people. If it were known that he was a prince, the story would change. He could then be a bargaining chip. Inglis wasn’t going to let that happen; she had other plans for Lahti.

“Yes, I agree. Anyway, let us form a plan for dealing with Alcard at the earliest

opportunity,” she said.

“Indeed. I will immediately hold a war conference at the palace. Reddas, come with me.”

Duke Bilford, who had been watching the proceedings so far, spoke up suddenly. “Wait, Your Majesty!”

“What is it, Duke Bilford?”

“In our kingdom’s time of need, the knights of Ymir will be there. We await your order!”

“Excellent. I am grateful for your loyalty. Then, you too shall join the conference.”

“Understood!”

The royal army was made up of two grand orders: the Paladins and the Royal Guard. However, the lords of each fiefdom, such as Ymir, maintained their own orders of knights. With the Paladins busy dealing with Venefic in the east, the Royal Guard would have to form the backbone of any response to Alcard in the north, which would weaken the defense of the capital and the royal demesne.

So one way or another, whether to reinforce local defenses or to fight on the northern front, feudal levies would be necessary to relieve the burden on the Royal Guard. However, the first priority for each lord was to protect their own holdings. It was only natural that they’d want to preserve their own forces rather than losing them protecting another’s territory. From their perspective, it would be best to leave it to someone else to handle.

Additionally, Inglis was aware of tensions King Carlias’s loyal followers had with a faction that looked to Prince Wayne. Those who followed the prince wouldn’t want to make a move until they were the ones under fire. Any loss of authority by King Carlias would simply improve the prince’s position.

And digging deeper into that line of thought, Duke Bilford likely looked to Prince Wayne. If nothing else, his son Rafael was a holy knight in the Paladins and widely recognized as the prince’s right-hand man. A rural fiefdom like Ymir was removed from palace politics, but many still saw him as tied to Prince Wayne.

A perceived member of the prince's faction being the first to offer his aid must have been gratifying to King Carlias. It showed a way forward for cooperation between the two factions.

This is good. This leads quite naturally into what I'm about to say next. "Your Majesty, I have one other proposal," she said to King Carlias.

"Speak. Your words have value."

"Thank you. I'd like you to send me and Rafinha to Alcard."

"For what purpose? To negotiate a ceasefire? Given Alcard's situation, would that not be difficult?"

Alcard had its own reasons for not backing down easily. The country was fighting for a hial menace and Artifacts to protect their own people.

"No... We infiltrate and create a situation where Alcard will withdraw on its own."

"Hmm? If that's possible, it would be more than I could ever have hoped for. But how? Didn't you just say they have their own reasons not to back down?"

"We'll deal with those reasons. As an example, if we can defeat the magicite beast—apparently a Prismer—that's appeared, they'd have no pressing need for a hial menace. If this leads to a political change, perhaps a coup, the new leadership may decide to revert to their existing relationship with Highland and stop the war. And if that doesn't occur—in a worst-case scenario, we'd still be able to attack their army from the rear and disrupt its operations."

"I follow you, but..." King Carlias trailed off, concerned.

Inglis had an idea of what was worrying him. "There are factions within Alcard opposed to the current policy. I'd like to cooperate with them. With this approach, I'll be able to avoid inflaming public opinion in Alcard."

"It's vital that you avoid arousing hostility. If that's possible...do you have a plan for how you'll make contact with their resistance?"

"I do. Fortunately, I have personal contacts among them."

"I see. If that's the case, then..."

King Carlias likely had no idea that this personal contact was knocked out on the floor in front of him, but that's precisely why Inglis had needed to keep Lahti from saying anything inconvenient. If he had revealed his identity, King Carlias probably wouldn't have accepted Inglis's proposal, which involved returning him to Alcard. Or even worse, he'd have accepted the proposal but not Lahti's return. That state of affairs would have been quite inconvenient; his imprisonment would have made it impossible for her plan to succeed.

Besides, lying that she had contacts when she had none would have presented its own problem. She preferred to do things without lying. She didn't want to lead Rafinha astray.

In addition to Lahti, she also needed Ian. He was the one most familiar with Alcard's current situation. He could be their guide. He'd probably cooperate if Lahti asked for his help. And most of all, there was the matter of Evel's technology.

That replication technology fascinated her. If there were any research facilities left, she'd like to visit them. And if she could, she would acquire her own duplicate to use as a training partner.

The likely Prismers which ravaged Alcard... Warriors like Ian or Diego, empowered by body modification... Alcard's forces pouring across the border... And just maybe, research facilities left behind by Evel...

The northern frontier is filled with dreams, Inglis thought. Today's events had left her feeling dissatisfied, deflated—so she wanted to go north and chase those dreams. She was sure good fights awaited her there.

Behind her, she could hear Rafinha and the others whispering to one another.

"Sheesh, Chris wants to go all the way north and fight a Prismers just because Diego blew up and she couldn't fight him!"

"And even if she doesn't find that Prismers, if she's trying to spark a revolution, we'll probably end up fighting their knights," Leone added.

"In the worst case, Alcard's army could surprise us and attack us," Liselotte agreed.

"Chris just wants to fight something no matter what!"

“B-But...it *would* be nice to have everyone along. I don’t think I could handle going back if it were only me and Lahti,” Pullum said.

“Oh, right,” Rafinha said. “If Ymir’s knights go north, that’ll mean I’m helping dad... Chris is really good at pretending to make sense.”

“No, I think this actually does make sense,” Leone countered.

“Indeed. If this goes well, both Karelia and Alcard will come out of this as well as possible,” Liselotte said.

“The problem’s her motivation! She just wants to fight!” Rafinha insisted.

Inglis cleared her throat to quiet Rafinha and the others down. Then, looking King Carlias straight in the eyes with utmost sincerity, she knelt before him. “I beg of you, Your Majesty! As a daughter of Ymir, now that Duke Bilford has stood forth for the country, I too would like to do all I can!”

“I understand...but whether or not you succeed, it must be seen as the work of Alcard’s resistance. Your own deeds must never come to light. Would you still go?”

“Yes. That would satisfy me.” For Inglis, the chance to fight strong foes without entering the public eye was the best possible result. She was being completely honest—though whether she’d be taken as such was another story.

“I see—splendid, as usual. Such spirit is admirable.” King Carlias was deeply impressed.

So was Reddas. “Your heart is as beautiful as you are, Lady Inglis!”

It was a misunderstanding on their part, but she didn’t mind that they were taking it in a good way. She had one other request, and at this point, they’d likely grant it.

“I accept your proposal. We’ll stand our ground and wait for your success. Go forth, Inglis!” King Carlias pronounced.

“I shall! Then, in addition, I’d like you to issue special orders to the knights’ academy. I won’t be able to attend class for some time, and I don’t want this to interfere with my advancement.”

“Very well. I see. I will do so.”

“And in order to carry out this operation, I’d like military funding—it’s important to secure provisions.”

This was very important. Away from the academy, she’d lose access to the all-she-could-eat food from its cafeteria. She wanted to go to Alcard—but not on an empty stomach. Proper funding was important. To be honest, if she wanted to leave for Alcard with Lahti, she could do so at any time. However, if she didn’t want to go hungry, she needed King Carlias’s permission.

“Yes! That is very important, Your Majesty!” Rafinha agreed. She knew precisely what Inglis was up to. Inglis could see the sparkle in Rafinha’s eyes as the girl imagined the delicacies Alcard had to offer, even though Rafinha had been careful not to say so.

“Of course. I’ll send a messenger to the knights’ academy later. Principal Miriela, I put my trust in you to support these young ladies,” King Carlias said.

“Y-Yes! With the situation as it is, our academy will do everything it can!” she replied.

“Thank you. Then, Reddas, Duke Bilford. Shall we be off?”

“Yes, my liege!” Reddas and Duke Bilford followed the king as he departed, but the duke stopped for a moment and looked back at Inglis and Rafinha.

“Rafinha, Inglis...”

“Yes, dad?”

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“I’m a bit surprised that His Majesty has taken you into his inner circles, but... This is an emergency that impacts us all. I can’t object to a dangerous mission simply out of love for my daughter. But don’t push yourselves too hard, and make sure you come home safe.”

“Of course.” Inglis and Rafinha nodded in unison.

Then Rafinha added, “And, er, mom, dad... These children lost their foster father today. They have nowhere to go. I’d like you to take them back to Ymir and find them a place to live.”

“If you could ensure their safety, that would give us peace of mind while we

carry out our duty,” Inglis said.

“Why, that’s...” Inglis’s mother frowned.

“That’s terrible... They’re still so young...” So did her Aunt Irina.

“Those poor children... Understood. Leave it to us.” The duke laughed warmly. “Rafael asked the same of us many times. It seems you are walking the path of a proper knight... Very well. Irina, Serena. I must attend the conference. I leave the rest to you two.”

“Y-Yes, dear...but what of the girls’ mission...?” Irina responded.

“Will they really be okay?” Serena asked. Both of them were tense. They were less anxious about Alina and the other children than they were about their daughters going to Alcard. They couldn’t hide their concern that their daughters would be placing themselves in danger.

Inglis felt a bit bad about that. She’d proposed the idea in the natural flow of a conversation, but it may have been better to have had the discussion when her mother wasn’t around.

She gently held her mother’s hand. “Don’t worry, mother. I’ll come back safe and sound.”

“My sweet, sweet Chris...”



Catching sight of the touching display out of the corner of his eye, King Carlias stopped. “I see, so you’re Inglis’s mother... You’re still so young.”

“Wh—?! Y-Yes, Your Majesty?!” Serena stuttered in shock. Being directly addressed by the king would surprise any person of her status. She never expected to converse with the king himself.

Her reaction didn’t surprise Inglis. “Mother, don’t be nervous. His Majesty is a kind man.”

“Y-Yes... I’m sorry. I must be embarrassing you...”

“Not at all.” Inglis softly placed a hand on her back.

“You’ve raised an excellent daughter. Please lend our country the strength you’ve cultivated in her,” King Carlias continued.

“I-It would be my honor! I have faith that she’ll come home safe!” Serena replied.

“Yes. Now, if I may...” This time, King Carlias took his leave for the palace.

After seeing him off, Inglis asked her mother with a smile, “Mother, what would you like as a souvenir from Alcard?”

“Chris, silly, we’re not going there on vacation,” Rafinha interjected.

“But I do plan on coming back safe. And this would make it a promise.” It was the best way to offer Serena some peace.

“Well, I guess that’s true... Then, what would you like, mom?” Rafinha asked Irina.

“Hmm... Well, if you promise me you’ll return safe and sound, I guess you could get me something,” Serena said.

“In that case, of course, it’s—” Irina began.

“Whatever looks good, as long as it’s food!” the mothers answered as one.

“Of course!” the daughters replied together.

“Aha ha, such a happy family... Like mothers, like daughters.” Principal Miriela grimaced.

From a distance, Leone murmured, "I can't help being jealous watching them have such sweet mothers who worry about them."

"Indeed. And they're so beautiful... It makes me remember my own mother," Liselotte replied.

"Right... Anyway, let's come back safe. I don't want to make mothers like that sad."

"Oh my. So you've decided to join them, Leone?"

"Yes. Haven't you, Liselotte?"

"Of course I shall. For the sake of my country, and that of my friends. Right, Pullum?"

"Thank you so much! I'm sure Lahti will be grateful too! Though he's still out cold..." Pullum said.

"Uh, I feel a little bit sorry for him," Leone said.

"Indeed. We should probably wake him up," Liselotte suggested.

The trio shook Lahti awake.

"Speaking of which, where's Yua?" Leone asked.

"Ah! Sh-She's vanished!" Liselotte replied.

Yua was long gone, having already taken Ian off somewhere...

Extra: Ripple's Return

Ambassador Theodore's ship was stationed in eastern Karelia, near the border with Venefic.

In the face of Venefic's army and the rime-bound Prismers, things were tense for the Paladins, but today was about to become a lot brighter.

"I'm back!" In a hangar below decks, Ripple, descending from a Flygear, greeted the knights around her with a bright smile.

"Ah, it's Lady Ripple!"

"Welcome back!"

As the knights shouted in joy, a figure rushed through the crowd. "Ripple!"

"Eris! I'm baaack! ♪"

"You seem well... I'm so glad."

"How've you been, Eris? Lonely without me?"

"Don't be silly. I'm not a little kid. I took care of everything while you were gone, so everything's been fine."

"Is she telling the truth? Guys?" Ripple asked the surrounding knights.

"Y-Yes, it's as Lady Eris says..."

"No real problems."

"And if I pressed you on that?" Ripple said.

"She was more tense than she needed to be."

"Like she was forcing herself to hold out until you came back... It was a little scary."

"Wh—?! Y-You don't need to tell her that!" Eris objected.

"I see, I see. But I'm back now! You're not alone anymore. There, there." Ripple hugged Eris tightly.

“S-Stop it! This is embarrassing!”

“Now, now. It’s fine. This is our emotional reunion! Aren’t you happy? I’m over the moon!”

“That’s, um... Anyway, how did they manage to heal you?”

“Well...”

“To be precise, they didn’t,” said Ambassador Theodore, who had returned with Ripple on the same Flygear. He walked over to the two of them.

“Lord Theodore, what happened?” Eris asked.

“Ripple herself hasn’t changed in any way. However, the phenomenon that was summoning demihuman magicite beasts is at an end. They’ve been wiped out, which means it will no longer occur. Therefore, it’s not so much a change in Lady Ripple as a change in her environment.”

“Wha—?! Someone hunted down each and every one of the magicite beasts she could summon?! What a brute-force method! It had to have been that girl!”

“Inglis?” Ripple prompted.

“Yes, her! That’s exactly the kind of plan she’d come up with!”

Rafael arrived with a smile. “Lady Ripple, welcome back! I’m so glad you’re okay!”

“Rafael! Yeah, I’m back! Your little sister and her friends got me back on my feet!”

“That’s wonderful! I’m so proud of them—Rani and Chris are doing well, right?”

“They sure are! They’re full of energy. Especially Inglis. Her eyes lit up when she went after the magicite beasts. She’s usually such a cute little sweetheart, but when it comes to fighting, she’s a little hellion, isn’t she?”

“Ha ha ha. Yeah, Chris has always been like that.”

“If she hasn’t changed, then that makes her still a kid at heart,” Eris grumbled. “Maybe she should grow up. It’s a little annoying when I go back and she just keeps wanting to spar.”

“Grow up, huh. Maybe if she finds a boyfriend, she’ll change?” Ripple asked.

“Well, maybe, but...” Rafael said.

Ripple and Eris shared a glance.

“Well, it’s a tough job...” Eris began.

“But someone’s gotta do it,” Ripple finished.

They each clapped a hand on Rafael’s shoulders.

“Wh-What?! I don’t—”

“I think you’d look great together,” Ripple said.

“A beautiful couple,” Eris said.

“D-Don’t be silly! Chris is Rani’s age! She’s only fifteen! She’s way too young!” Rafael protested.

“But she’s mature, and she’s more than pretty enough, don’t you think?” Ripple asked.

“Well, uhh, how should I put it...” Rafael replied.

“Sheesh, Rafael’s turning into a tomato. Are you sure *you’re* not the kid here? Someone’s got to teach Inglis about growing up,” Ripple said.

“If you take your time, someone might beat you to her,” Eris added.

“Worry less about age and place a greater importance on how you feel about each other. You need to address your own feelings. You give yourself over to this country and its people—you need someone who’ll support you,” Theodore remarked.

“Even you, Theodore?! But I—” Rafael stammered.

Just then, a knight who had been on guard in the area rushed in. “Sir Rafael! We have a situation!”

“Ah...yes! What is it?!” Rafael gratefully turned to the new arrival.

“He’s getting away...” Ripple muttered.

As did Eris. “He’s escaping...”

However, the expressions on their faces soon became more serious.

“What?! Large numbers of magicite beasts around the Prismer?!” Rafael shouted.

“Yes! They just keep appearing! What are your orders?”

“Understood! Let’s take the fight to them! I’ll be right there! Inform Prince Wayne as well!”

The peaceful atmosphere aboard the ship from Ripple’s arrival suddenly became much more chaotic.

“I’m glad we hurried back. Looks like things are about to get busy,” she remarked.

“Looks like you’ve got some work to catch up on,” Eris chided.

“Sure, leave it to me! This is my place in the world. I’m here to protect it.”

“Eh? Did you just say something?”

“Nope! C’mon, let’s go!”

Eris and Ripple scrambled aboard their Flygears.

Afterword

First, thank you very much for picking up this book! So, that's the fourth volume of *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. I hope you enjoyed it.

The world's still kind of a mess, but how have you all been doing? Things haven't been going that great at my day job. I've mostly been an on-site tech consultant, but the client I've been working with for over a decade is closing that department due to the current situation, and I'm going to have to go somewhere else. And of course, when you go somewhere new, you have to learn a lot of new things. It's not easy. It's exhausting. But at least I have somewhere to go. If the pace of my writing slows down, that's why, so please don't worry.

Life is tough, isn't it? At times like this, I feel better when I look at my daughter's face.

Lately we've been playing *Super Smash Bros.* together every day, but when we duo online, we just can't win. Everyone's too strong! Donkey Kong grabs me, knocks me off the stage, and I can't make it back. My win rate's gotta be under ten percent at this point. I'm not sure how much practice it takes to get to that level. Everyone's so talented. I wish I could move as quickly, but I'm not sure if I'll reach that point before my daughter stops saying, "Daddy, let's play!" every day.

No games and she gets angry; no bath time and she gets angry. That slows my writing pace as well... Anyway, I've been given permission to write the next volume, so I'll do my best!

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor N, the illustrator Nagu, and everyone else involved for their hard work and dedication. Another wonderful Chris for the cover! And the first volume of Moto Kuromura's manga version is out now! It already got a second print run immediately after release, so I'm overjoyed, and I'm grateful. If I take a step back and look at it objectively, I really see how it

shines. I'm very, very grateful that such an amazing person is handling the manga adaptation. If you haven't seen it yet, check it out!

Goodbye for now!



“So you
only
mind
being a
‘doll,’
not the
dress-up?
Then
how
about
this?”

“Eeek!
Stop it,
Rani!”

Rafinha

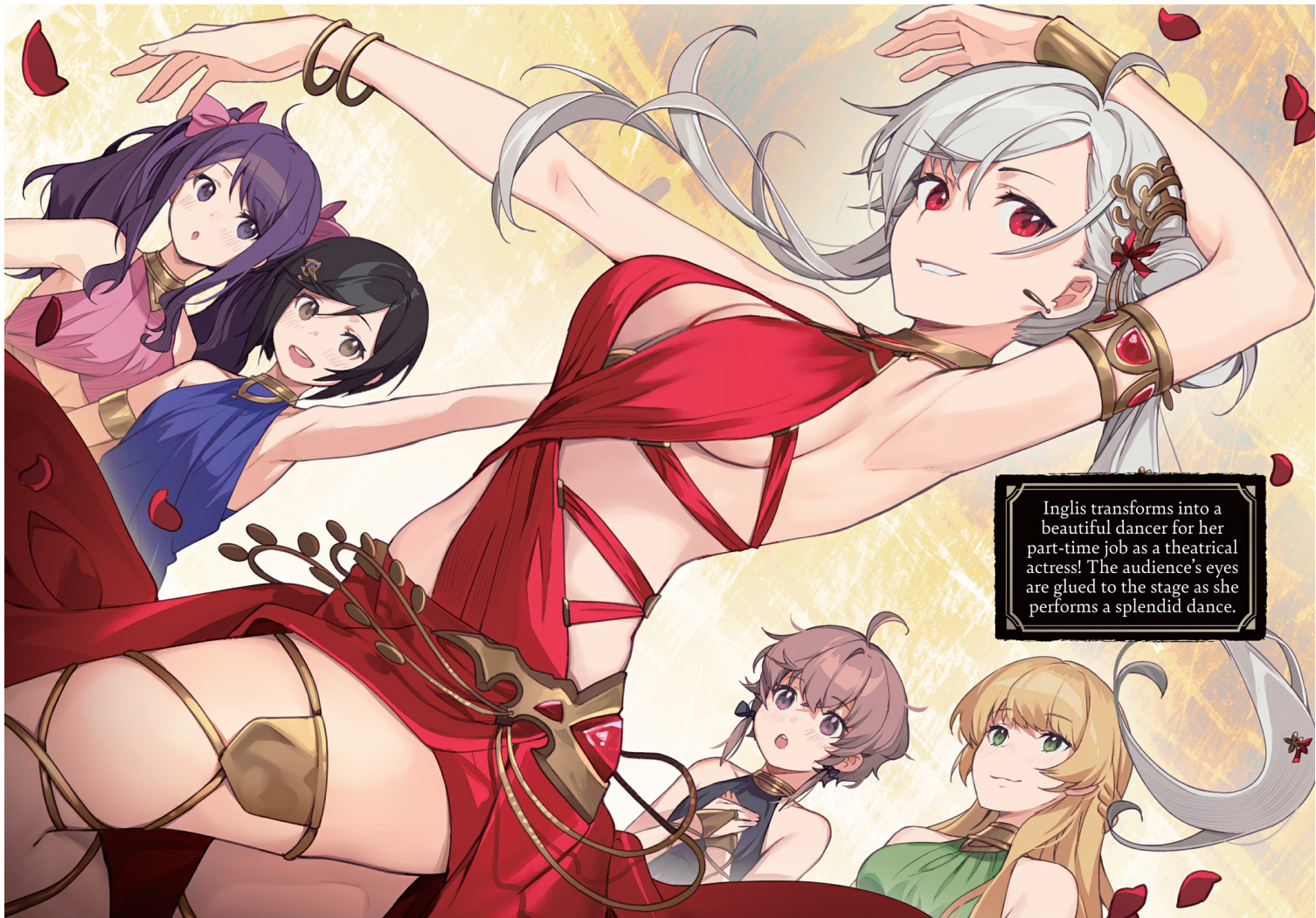
(Rani)

Inglis's childhood friend and Duke Bilford's daughter. She's working alongside Inglis in a play.

Inglis

(Chris)

The former Hero-King, reborn in the far future as a girl. She decides to work for a theatrical troupe in exchange for food.



Inglis transforms into a beautiful dancer for her part-time job as a theatrical actress! The audience's eyes are glued to the stage as she performs a splendid dance.



Yua

An apathetic second-year in the squire program. She was lured into appearing in the play by the promise of cute guys.

“So...
What
are you
doing?”

“I tried to
help out...
Aha ha
ha...”

Ian

A boy affiliated with the theatrical troupe where Inglis and friends have started working. From the snowy lands of Alcard, he is an acquaintance of Lahti and Pullum.

Bonus Short Stories

Preparing for the Expedition

“There we go.”

“Oomph!”

Crates of supplies were piling up on the deck of a Flygear Port. They contained the most important things needed for an expedition—rations, of course. Care had been taken to select things which would keep as long as possible: flour, grains, vegetables, and completely dried fish and meat. Supplies were coming directly from the crown, so there were no worries regarding a lack of food for the trip.

“Anyway, that should do it!” Rafinha announced, nodding in satisfaction.

“Indeed, Rani. With this, we don’t need to be concerned about going hungry for a while.” Inglis nodded as well.

“Th-There’s so much,” Leone commented, baffled by the tower of food.

“At this point we’re less an infiltration team and more a field kitchen,” Liselotte said.

Lahti sighed. “Seriously. I don’t even know what we’re supposed to be doing anymore.”

“It’s fine! We can’t fight on an empty stomach!” Rafinha insisted.

“Honestly, if a powerful foe showed up, I’d want to fight them even if I did have an empty stomach,” Inglis said.

“You’re welcome to fight them without having any, Chris. Leaves more for me!”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t want to eat *anything*!”

“Why’re you so excited? It’s not like this is a field trip,” Lahti said.

“I know. Our fathers will be on the front lines,” Rafinha said. “We might be able to put a stop to things before they get seriously hurt, which would mean we’d have protected the knights of Ymir. I’m serious about this.”

“We need to eat properly to ensure that, if worse comes to worst, we can put up a fight,” Inglis said.

“Good point,” Lahti said after an awkward pause. “Sorry to stick my nose in, then.”

“Hey, Chris, did you get any sweets?”

“Only those cookies.”

“There’s no way that’ll be enough! Let’s go buy some more!”

“Yeah. Let’s go to that delicious dessert shop on a major street.”

“Let’s get some of everything while we have the chance!”

“Sounds good. We don’t normally get to buy that much.”

Lahti groaned. “Are you really serious? *Really?*”

“By the way, Inglis, Rafinha—you can cook, right? You know we’ll be the ones having to cook for ourselves during the expedition.” Leone suspected the worst.

“Uh...!” Inglis and Rafinha both looked surprised.

“Huh?! Does that mean you can’t?”

“W-Well... We normally focus on the eating part, you know?” Rafinha said.

“I can grill fresh-caught fish, I guess,” Inglis offered.

“That doesn’t really count as cooking a meal. How about you, Liselotte?”

“I lack any experience in that regard. I’ve never even held a kitchen knife,” Liselotte replied.

“I-I can’t cook either...” Lahti added.

“S-So all these treasures you’ve assembled will just be going to waste, then?” Leone asked.

“*You* can cook, right, Leone?” Rafinha asked.

“Yes. I cooked for myself when I lived in Ahlemin.”

“Oh, phew! Thank goodness you’re with us.”

“But don’t make me do it all myself, okay? I know, why don’t we borrow the cafeteria kitchen and get some practice in?”

“What?! I don’t know if I’ll be able to—”

“You can do it if you try.”

“Hmm... If I learn to cook and then give something to Ambassador Theodore later, do you think he’d be happy? I haven’t done anything yet to thank him for my new Artifact.”

“Yes, I’m sure he’d be quite appreciative.”

“Absolutely not! You can’t learn to cook for that reason!” Inglis interjected.

“But it’s important for the expedition too, right?” Rafinha asked.

“You don’t have to learn how to cook, Rani! I will! Leone, let’s go!”

“Huh? Okay...”

Rafinha watched Inglis pull Leone along. “Ha ha. And that’s how you get her to do all the hard work.”

“Wow, that was cruel,” Liselotte commented.

“She’s always nagging me. I have to fight back sometimes.” Rafinha smiled and stuck out her tongue.

Misappropriation

“These are the military funds appropriated by His Majesty. Please accept them.”

“I thank you. We will see this mission through.” In the principal’s office of the knights’ academy, Inglis respectfully accepted a bag of gold coins from the Royal Guard’s captain Reddas.

“And with that, I take my leave. May fortune favor you,” he said.

“Yes. You take care as well.” Inglis smiled at Reddas. She wasn’t particularly

trying to flatter him, but she was in a good mood right now.

“Ah, thank you for such a lovely smile! It’ll be a shame not to appreciate it up close in the coming days, but the memory will sustain me as I head to war.”

“Oh, stop that! Surely there are better things to have on your mind.”

“Understood, ma’am! Very well, then...” Whether he understood what was going on or not, Reddas left the room with a grin on his face.

“Give me a break.” Inglis sighed. Reddas was quite passionate when dealing with her, and as a result, it was tiring to deal with *him*.

“That wasn’t very nice, Chris,” Rafinha said.

“Huh? What do you mean, Rani?”

“You know how he’s going to get if you smile at him like that. You should save those smiles for Rafael.”

“I’m cautious with them, no matter who they’re aimed at. The circumstances were unavoidable this time.”

“Why?”

“Well, I thought we could use the money to try out some of the restaurants we’ve wanted to visit but haven’t been able to...”

There was silence for a moment while Rafinha realized what that meant. “I get your point!” Her eyes gleamed wickedly. The capital was full of enticing restaurants, but as students, she and Inglis didn’t have a lot of spending money. A few delicious meals to raise their spirits before they marched off to war wouldn’t be a bad thing.

“See?”

“Right! Okay, let’s go shopping for the mi—”

“Absolutely not!” Principal Miriela interjected forcefully. “Hold it right there! That’s brazen misappropriation of public funds, and I won’t allow it! I’ll manage this money!” She snatched the bag of coins away, and, looking inside, began to speak again. “Oh my, ha ha! This will definitely turn around the academy’s budget situation. Yes, indeed.”

“Huuuh?! Doesn’t that apply to you, too, Principal Miriela?!” Rafinha protested.

“Yes, misappropriation would be a problem,” Inglis said.

“Misappropriation? Our academy is a public institution, so it would be quite *appropriate* appropriation. These funds are for fulfilling the missions of the knights’ academy, so as its principal, I have the right to decide how they’re allocated!”

“No fair!” Rafinha protested.

“That’s terrible!” Inglis agreed.

“How exactly? Whose fault is it that the academy’s budget was in trouble to begin with in the first place?”

The two girls exchanged glances.

“Well...”

“Ah...”

“It’s because of *you two*! I know I promised you all you could eat, and I won’t be taking that away, but if you were given enough money to spend on stuffing your faces, I’ll use it for the academy instead!”

“Agh!” they both grunted.

“And now that we’ve made that clear...♪” Miriela continued. “Oh my, there are so many interesting research materials to stock up on, heh heh!”

“That’s just your hobby!” Rafinha protested. “If it’s okay for you to use it for something personal, then we should get to too!”

“Even just one coin!” Inglis begged. “There’s a restaurant I’ve really been wanting to try!”

“Come on, stop it, everyone!” Leone plucked up the bag of coins, which had fallen to the floor during the argument. “Why don’t the rest of us handle the supplies?”

“Agreed.” Liselotte nodded to Leone, and they both left the principal’s office.

Gourmet Map

Inglis and her friends were sitting in a knights' academy classroom.

"Here's a map of Alcard," Lahti announced.

"Thanks, Lahti," Inglis answered.

"We wouldn't be able to get such a detailed map ourselves, so this is a huge help," Rafinha said. "Chris, let's use this to discuss our strategy."

"Yeah, Rani. Our primary objective is the capital. Beyond that, I'd also like to stop in a town that was ravaged by the magicite beasts."

"Then it's about the same east or west," Lahti replied. "Both routes have towns where we'll be able to resupply along the way."

"By the way, what's there to eat in this town in the east?" Inglis asked.

"Probably noodles in a spicy soup. It's cold there, so they tend to eat things that will keep them warm."

"Hmmm." Inglis drew a picture of noodles in a soup bowl on the map. "And what about the west?"

"There are hot springs there. The fishing's good year-round, so they're famous for hot pot and for eggs boiled in the hot springs."

"Hmmmm." This time, Inglis drew a fish before pointing elsewhere. "How about here?"

"I don't think that has anything to do with our mission..." Lahti murmured.

"That's okay. It's just for reference."

"The same as the first one, noodles," he answered, hesitant this time.

"Hmmmmmm! And here?"

"It's close to forested mountains, so they have a lot of wild vegetation. But we won't be anywhere near there for our mission either."

"That's okay. Next..."

Nearly an hour passed before Inglis announced, "And it's complete!"

“It looks delicious!” Rafinha nodded along in satisfaction. Drawings of food decorated every nook and cranny of the map of Alcard.

“Rani, where do you want to go? What do you want to eat?”

“Hmm, I want to try this and this—”

“Ooh, sounds good. How about here too?”

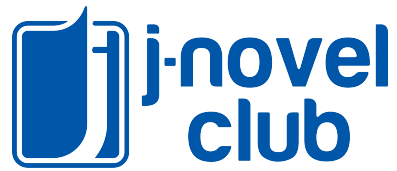
“What’s with all these zigzags?! Alcard’s army will have attacked us by then!” Lahti protested.

“Well, we won’t know our actual route until we get there,” Rafinha pointed out.

“Precisely. It’s best to note what’s delicious so we’ll be prepared no matter where we travel!” Inglis agreed.

“And voilà, a gourmet map!”

“*That’s* what you wanted me for?” Lahti sighed so, so deeply.



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Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire ♀
Volume 4

by Hayaken

Translated by Mike Langwiser Edited by Carly Smith

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